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Double- Eagles

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Mark S. Gross

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DOUBLE - EAGLES

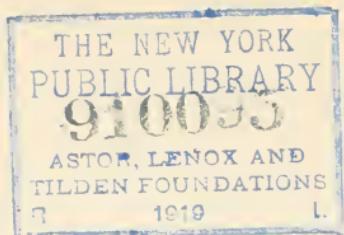
Double-Eagles

by

Mark S. Gross, S. J.



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To My Nephew
Jacob Gross

Introduction

“**D**OUBLE-EAGLES,” boys, is a tale of fishing and treasure hunting and hairbreadth escapes: pleasures dear to your hearts—and mine. The scene is laid along one of the beautiful streams of Missouri. The time is “many years ago,” when the author, who is not inconveniently decrepit now, was of an age apt to imagine that every dark wood held a mystery at its heart and every green river “hole” concealed a “big un.” Isn’t this so?

The incidents narrated in this book may never have occurred; indeed, I fear grown-ups will tell you the whole story is an exaggeration. Maybe it is; anyhow, boys, (you don’t mind my speaking to you this way?) I can remember dreaming of these things and wishing they would come true. Perhaps you also dreamt of them; perhaps you also wished them to come true: perhaps? but there’s no perhaps about it! Well, then, get into the boat yonder—“old Sam Jones” has two—and come with us on this trip; “Ned Taylor, his brother Hal, and I” will be glad to have you—as witnesses. Are you on board? then shove off!

M. S. G.

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CHAPTER I

The Start

I REMEMBER as if it were yesterday that bright June morning many years ago when we three, Ned Taylor, his brother Hal, and I set out down the Frisco track for the Marmac. We had got off the train at Kimley about ten o'clock, bought our provisions, and were now on our way to meet old Sam Jones down at the sand quarry near the river. We had arranged by letter to buy his boat for ten dollars; we had written that we should commence our trip this morning; and he was to have the boat in shipshape condition and all ready for us.

Now here, before I get any further, I think it well to mention how old we were. Ned was the eldest, having just turned seventeen; I was a year younger; and Hal, if questioned, would probably have said that he was going on sixteen, though, to be sure, he had some three or four months still to go. For all that, Hal knew more about fishing than either Ned or I; certainly he knew more than I did.

Well, it was a pretty hard job carrying our luggage that half mile to the river. It was a hot day, and the cinders along the track were blistering. Our outfit, too, being considerable, made the way seem hotter. And yet, seeing we were to spend a week on the river, coming down from Kimley to

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Valley Junction, we were not taking along so much as you would expect. Here is what we had.

First of all, there was a blanket apiece. Then we had a .22 Winchester repeater with two hundred rounds of cartridges. For fishing-tackle we brought along two trot-lines and one hundred and ninety snoods with hooks attached. Ned was taking with him a handsome rod and reel and a card of flies, which stylish things he had borrowed from a friend. He was going to try his hand at casting for bass, he said. Hal was carrying a big bucket of worms — five thousand of them — which he had spent the previous ten days in digging. As I said, I myself am not much of a fisherman, but I slipped into our kit a large black hook, about the length of your hand, which I had purchased with the idea that it might come in handy. Then, of course, we had a dip-net and fish-bag, and these completed our fishing gear.

Added to the foregoing articles were also a brand-new hatchet we had bought in Kimley, a skillet, a coffee-pot, a knife, fork, spoon, cup, and plate apiece, and a lantern with a half-gallon can of kerosene.

As to provisions, we had four pounds of coffee, some sugar, a flitch of bacon, salt, two dozen loaves of bread, and, as a delicacy, a jar of strawberry jam.

I forgot to mention that Ned had on his person a pencil and note-book in which he intended to keep a diary of our adventures. And indeed it is

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owing to this little book that I am able to recall so vividly and to set down here many an incident which would otherwise have slipped my memory.

Staggering under this load, we made our way on down the Frisco track. When we reached the little ravine that dipped into the river just this side of the quarry we heard a voice hailing us.

“Hi, boys! Just foller the path down the right here.”

We did so and came out on a little landing at the margin of the river. There, sure enough, was Sam with an oar in his hand, standing near a broad-beamed rowboat that looked pretty old and weather-beaten.

“Here y’are, boys, an’ right glad I am to see you. An’ here’s your boat, all spick an’ span like new. An’ dirt cheap too at ten dollars. I cal’late I’m givin’ her away fer ten dollars.”

We shook hands, thanked him, and stowed our baggage aboard.

“She doesn’t leak, Sam, does she?” I inquired.

Sam spat indignantly into the river.

“Leak! No! D’you reckon I’d be a-sellin’ you boys a leaky boat? Not Sam Jones. She did leak, though,” he admitted, “till I caulked her up. But you may lay in her all night now an’ the only water you’ll feel ’ull be the blessed doos of heaven.”

With which reassurance, after we had paid him ten crisp one-dollar bills, we embarked at last on the pleasure trip we had so long looked forward to. Hal, being the lightest, sat on the bow thwart; I manned

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the oars, and Ned seated himself in the stern, with all our things packed snugly at his feet.

With a few strong strokes I shot the boat out into midstream and then sent her stem straight around with the current. We were off! Before us lay a hundred miles of woods and water, unexplored regions big with a thousand adventures. Each one of us, I think, must have felt his heart thrill exquisitely with mingled pleasure and dread. For my own part, as we rounded a curve in the river and saw for the last time old Sam Jones standing away back there on the bank, I know that a queer sensation of danger and delight took possession of me.

It was towards midday, and everything was still and sleepy. The river moved along noiselessly between green banks, with the hot sun flaring from its shining surface. The trees on either hand stirred ever so gently as an occasional light breeze puffed through their topmost branches. And now and then as we passed a log lying out from the shore a turtle would slide silently off and disappear in the green depths. And once, as I took a long sweep with my oars and leaned back on the thwart, I saw far up in the milky blue sky a lone buzzard wheeling slowly.

But suddenly, drifting idly around a curve, we found ourselves face to face with a dangerous rapids. As if by magic the quiet laziness of the scene had changed. Before us sounded the angry rush of waters. A kingfisher, as though to give us warning, came shrilly chattering over our heads; and the next moment we were being sucked into the mouth of the

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dashing and foaming strait. For the river, at this point, after advancing broadly and silently up to the bend, suddenly converged into a narrow alley of water, swift, deep, and full of ugly sawyers, with a roof of willows reaching out low over the surface.

Before I could quite collect my wits the boat had hit a snag, spun round and shot stern foremost under the overhanging boughs. Ned jumped to his feet to catch at one of these in order, if possible, to swing the prow downstream. He reached up and grabbed, and at the same instant I heard a terrified yell and saw him start back violently, nearly capsizing the boat. He had laid both hands on a large moccasin that was lying on the limb; and the snake was even then hanging head downward, its jaws open and its forked tongue darting wickedly in and out. Before I could even take a stroke we had sped past the angry reptile; and then, as Ned made a step to regain his seat, a low-hanging branch knocked him clear out of the boat and into the rushing river. My heart jumped to my throat as I saw him disappear headlong into the treacherous current.

For a moment Hal and I held our breath. The boat swept on, but there was no sign of Ned. And then, just as we were losing hope, his head popped up not two yards behind us.

“Are you all right?” I cried and reached him an oar.

He was blowing so hard that he could scarcely speak.

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"All right," he gasped. "Undercurrent — got — me. Thought — I'd — never come up."

By this time we were already past the rapids and once more out on a broad, smooth-flowing part of the river.

"Pull for the shore," he said; "I'll catch hold of the stern."

Shortly after we were on dry land again. It was a long gravel-bar, hot as a stove beneath the scorching rays of the midday sun. Ned took off his clothes and spread them out to dry.

"But you'll burn to a blister without a stitch on," I warned him. "Here, put this gunny-sack around your shoulders."

"There's some shade down there," said he, pointing to a great log lying athwart a sand-dune. "Let's have a slice of bread apiece and some of that strawberry jam. My clothes'll be dry by that time. Hal, get a loaf of bread and the jam."

Hal hesitated.

"Gee, you going to eat up all the provisions before we get started? Besides, we'll never get our lines in for to-night if we don't hurry on and get to Whalen's."

(We had decided to make our first stage at Whalen's Bluff. Whalen's Bluff, it may be noted, was the only part of the river we were acquainted with throughout the whole of our journey.)

"Oh, we've got lots of time, Hal," said I. "It can't be much after one o'clock."

Shaking his head, Hal reluctantly got the eatables

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out of the boat, and we had our little snack in the shadow of the big log.

By the time we were finished, sure enough, Ned's clothes were quite dry. We got in our boat then and once more put off down the river. Only now Ned had relieved me at the oars while I had his place in the stern. After a space,

"Say, fellows," he suddenly exclaimed, resting on his oars, "we haven't christened our boat yet. What shall we call her?"

"'Blue Lightning,'" I suggested, after a little thought.

"But she isn't blue," Ned objected. "If she was only blue," he admitted, "that *would* be a good name, because she *is* kinda speedy."

"Well, how would 'The Firefly' do then?" I submitted.

"I don't like that either, somehow. Let's christen her 'The Lady of the Lake'."

"Shucks," said Hal from the other end of the boat. "This isn't any lake, it's a river."

"Well," said Ned, after two or three pulls at the oars, "I think 'Wyvon' would be a beautiful name."

"Wyvon!" I echoed blankly.

"What's a wyvon?" asked Hal curiously.

"A wyvon!" Ned snorted derisively. "Wyvon's a lady's name!"

"How do you spell it then?" Hal persisted.

"Y-v-o-double n-e, of course."

"Oh," said Hal. And then, after a pause, "I've

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got a better name than Wyvон!" he cried. "Let's call her 'Big Cat'!"

Ned laughed.

"Who ever heard of a boat called 'Big Cat'!"

"That's a good name, Ned," I seconded; "it might bring us luck, and we might really catch a great big cat. That's a peach of a name!"

"There's something in that," he admitted slowly.

"And just think," Hal chipped in excitedly, "if we *do* catch a great big cat!"

"That's a fact," Ned decided in a convinced manner. "'Big Cat' *is* a good name. Get a cup, Hal, and pour water over the prow and say, 'I christen thee 'Big Cat'.'"

"What's the use of that?" Hal protested. "We've agreed to 'Big Cat.' She's 'Big Cat' already, isn't she?"

"No, of course not. She isn't 'Big Cat' until you christen her. That's the way they christen all the big ships. Only they crack a bottle of champagne across the prow instead of pouring river water."

"Well," Hal assented sceptically; and fished out a cup and performed the required ceremony.

"There now," said Ned, pulling on the oars again. "We're making our voyage in regular style—in the good ship *Big Cat*!" And he buckled lustily to his task.

CHAPTER II

A Sinister Conversation

FOR some little while we moved along down the current without saying anything; we were looking at the changing scenery on either side of us. On our right were high wooded hills, beetling out at intervals in craggy precipices that dropped sheer down to the water. Now and then we passed a sort of cave or grotto, hollowed in these cliffs, which looked cool and inviting. Long green ferns were growing there, and soft moss; and water trickled down from the sides. On our left the country was low, with dense woods of willow and sycamore. So thick were the trees that they seemed a solid bank of green. And over the margin of treetops, all along the shore, hung a shimmering white haze.

Presently Ned rested on his oars.

“Gee,” said he, “I’m hot! I wonder if we can’t find a spring somewhere along here. There ought to be a spring at the foot of these hills.”

“Let’s wait till we get to Whalen’s Bluff,” said Hal. “There’s a well there at old Aunt Stanley’s. It’s only about a mile and half further down.”

“Mile and a half!” Ned derided. “I’ll bet it’s three miles if it’s an inch!”

“We can drink river water,” I suggested. “We’ll

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have to get used to it anyway. There aren't any more houses after we pass Whalen's till we get to Glencarm. That's what you said. You said everything was as wild as Indians."

"I know," Ned answered. "But there must be springs along the river. Lots and lots of them. Bound to be springs, if we can only find them. Kit Carson and Daniel Boone and all the pioneers, they could always find springs when they wanted them."

"They dug 'em then," said Hal doggedly.

"Look out, Ned!" I cried. "Here's a rapids!"

We were coasting around a bend at the base of a cliff, and I who was sitting in the stern and facing forward was the first to see the swift sweep of the river towards the cliff. Unless we could keep our boat well over to the opposite shore we were in danger of being dashed against the steep bluff.

"Pull hard on your left!" I cried. "Harder still, Ned!"

Ned worked furiously. Down the rapids we shot, the current taking us nearer and nearer the fatal cliff.

"Harder, Ned!" I shouted again. "Keep her nose to the other bank, and pull for all you're worth!"

The sweat ran down his face, and the veins on his temples stood out like whipecords. Nearer and nearer, for all that, we were drawn towards the cliff. Thirty yards further down a promontory of detached rock jutted out into the river. Here the water boiled and roared; to hit this meant the certain smash-up of *Big Cat*.

"Now once more, Ned! Give her the left!"

A SINISTER CONVERSATION

We swept past safely, but I could have put out my hand and touched the great brown boulder.

With a sigh of relief Ned lay on his oars as we drifted out again into a long unruffled stretch of water.

“That was a pretty close shave,” he observed rather indifferently, and felt his muscle.

“Tired?” I asked.

“Oh, no. But I’m sure thirsty. We’ve got to find that spring now.”

“Well,” said I, “we’ll stop along here at the first place we can land and do a little exploring. There ought to be a spring at the bottom of these cliffs.”

The river was still hugging the base of the hills, and the entire right bank, as far as we could see, was a long line of rocky bluffs indented here and there by leafy recesses. We had not gone far before we came on one of these nooks set between two high cliffs that fell straight down to the river. Ned ran the prow on the soft mossy bank beside a clump of hazels, and Hal sprang out.

“Get the coffee-pot,” he said, “and if we find a spring we can take some water with us.”

I took the coffee-pot out of our provision box and went ashore.

It was a very pretty spot where we had landed. The tall cliffs on either hand receded from the river in the shape of a rough V, about fifteen yards deep and twenty wide. The place was filled with moss and ferns and dogwood and hazel bushes. It was cool, too, and there was a sort of sweet smell about it.

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And yet there was no trace of a spring. We searched along the base of the rock all around, but there was nothing to be seen but the green moss.

I straightened up and, as I looked over my shoulder, my eye fell on a sort of natural ledge about a foot above the river on the side of the cliff that stood downstream. I crossed over and examined the rock more closely. Sure enough, it was a perfect little ledge about a foot and a half wide. It ran along the face of the cliff and disappeared around the curve where the rock bulged out into the river. Some twelve inches below the ledge the blue water slid along with a low swishing sound.

I turned to my two comrades.

“Wait here. I’m going to follow this ledge around the cliff. Maybe it’ll lead to a spring.”

I started forward. Though I had to hug the face of the cliff pretty closely, it was comparatively easy walking. I rather expected the ledge to end abruptly when I got to the furthest projection of the bluff. But I was mistaken; it still continued, though narrowing. As I could now see, it led to a nook exactly similar to the one I had just left. But unfortunately, just as I thought I should reach it — the land was only five yards away — my path became so narrow that I could advance only at the imminent risk of falling into the river. I stopped and was about to call out to Ned and Hal to bring the boat around. I opened my mouth, but the words died on my lips.

From the depths of the recess a man had ripped out a brutal oath, and I heard the words:

A SINISTER CONVERSATION

“Enough o’ reasons one way an’ t’other! If you don’t do as Buck an’ me wants, by the powers! I’ll mash yer head in with my fist an’ heave yer stinkin’ carcass to the turtles!”

Struck through with fear, I clung to the cliff, not daring to move. The voice had come from behind a clump of bushes not fifteen yards from where I stood. Before I could make up my mind what to do another voice spoke up, a cringing, whining voice.

“Well, Jerry, you know I ain’t a man to deceive you an’ Buck. I’ll do what you want. Didn’t I figger out that cipher for you? Where’d you be now without a man of eddication like me?”

“Enough o’ that,” growled the first voice. “We knows you done that, an’ ain’t we promised you a part o’ the pile? But mind you, Tom Crawford”—and here followed a terrible oath—“if I ketch you tryin’ to double-cross me an’ Buck I’ll squeeze you to a pulp with these two hands, same as I did Pete Bain up at Stanton.”

By this time I had recovered somewhat from my fright. I had evidently stumbled upon a camp of ruffians, and even now was prevented from being discovered only by a few bushes. I was perilously placed indeed. Still, my mind was clear now, and I had regained control of my nerves. The first thing to do was to warn Ned and Hal not to make any noise; for it seemed to me that if such men caught us thus apparently spying on them they would certainly make short work of us. Indeed, it was strange that they had not heard us already, but I must sup-

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pose they were so intent upon their quarrel that they heeded nothing else. Besides, the cliff cut off the sound of our voices.

Already I had begun very softly to edge my way back along the ledge. Ned was the first to catch sight of me, but before he could speak I had put my finger to my lips. He held his tongue then, more on account of my frightened look, I suppose, than of my gesture.

“What is it?” he whispered eagerly as I stepped down on the ground.

I related my discovery as hurriedly as I could. Then, “The best thing we can do is to clear out of here at once,” I advised.

But Ned’s spirit of adventure was aroused.

“Not on your life!” he whispered. “I’m going to find out more about this business. You and Hal get in the boat and be ready to shove off. And get the rifle out; you may have to do some shooting.”

Before we could protest he was up on the ledge and stealthily working himself forward.

Hal and I, with fear at our hearts, quietly pushed the boat into the water till her prow was just resting on the bank. Then we got in. I took the oars, while Hal, seated in the stern, carefully locked the Winchester together.

Ned was already out of sight around the jut of the cliff. How long we waited for him I do not know. It seemed an age that we sat there, our hearts beating wildly and our eyes rivetted on the shoulder of rock. Strain my ears as I might I could hear not a word.

A SINISTER CONVERSATION

There was only the low ripple of the water around the stern of the boat, and the rustle of the trees up on the brow of the cliff. Once a quail whistled, sharply and clearly, on the other side of the river; and once a kingfisher flew silently past.

Then, at last, to our infinite relief Ned appeared at the corner of the bluff and advanced noiselessly and swiftly along the ledge. Once on the ground again he darted for the boat.

“Row upstream as soft as you can,” he whispered, and shoved off.

I obeyed.

“Now put her about and go down the middle as though nothing happened.”

“Wouldn’t it be better to let them get ahead of us?” said I.

“They’re going back,” he explained; “up to Kimley. Gee! one of them’s as big as a giant!”

CHAPTER III

We Pitch Camp

I WAS burning to ask Ned what he had overheard, but we didn't dare to speak of anything yet, much less of the scoundrels over yonder on the shore. We were passing them now at about thirty or forty yards from the cliff.

We could see only two, although I made sure there had been three of them when I stood on the ledge, eavesdropping. Perhaps the other was still concealed by the bushes. One was a huge hulk of a fellow, as big as a giant, as Ned had said. He had a great shock of yellow hair and a horrible scar, as I noted even at that distance, which ran from his right eye across his cheek to the point of his frowzy chin. His companion was a smaller man, thin and wiry, with black hair and a scrawny black beard. He had but one eye, and this of itself lent him an air of villainy. Altogether, they were an evil-looking pair.

As we passed them, they paused in launching their skiff (it was a blue skiff with red gunwales) and cast a black look our way. It seemed to me that the man with the scar was about to hail us, but on second thought he changed his mind and with a rumbling oath bent once more to his work.

We were a goodish distance below them now and easily out of earshot.

WE PITCH CAMP

"Lord!" said Ned, still in a whisper, "but I had a close call back there."

"What was it?" Hal and I asked excitedly in the same breath. "What did you hear?"

Ned leaned forward on the thwart.

"Just as I was about to come back to the boat the big fellow — his name's Jerry Bottom — got up on the other side of the bushes. Gee, he must be seven feet tall! I thought sure I was discovered. But luckily his back was turned to me. You should have seen me hustle back over that ledge."

"But what were they quarrelling about?" I asked.

"Well, there are three of them: Buck Webb, Tom Crawford and this Jerry. Tom Crawford wants to go on down the river. He said the sooner they got it the better: whatever 'it' is."

"I heard them talking about a cipher and a pile," I broke in. "What's a cipher?"

"A secret writing," said Ned promptly. "I'll bet I know what it's all about. They're after a treasure or something, that's what they are!"

"Gee!" said Hal.

"Well," Ned continued, "Jerry and Buck Webb want to go back to Kimley and get more whiskey. They said they hadn't enough to last them. The other fellow said whiskey wouldn't help them in their search. 'You'll only get tarnation drunk,' he said. 'And besides, you'll be running your neck into a noose at Kimley. They've found Pete Bain by this time.' Bottom whips out a swear word. 'I told you we've had enough of your talk, Tom Crawford. Let

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me hear another word from you and by thunder! I'll wring your neck like a chicken!' Only he didn't say 'by thunder;' he swore. You see, they're half afraid this Crawford fellow wants to double-cross them and get the treasure himself. I wonder if it really *is* a treasure," Ned added wistfully. "Gee, if I only thought it was!"

"Gee whiz, if it *was* a real treasure!" exclaimed Hal; and for a while we were silent, pondering this thrilling prospect.

"Shucks," said Ned at last, "there's no use thinking about it. They've gone back to Kimley, and we won't see 'em again probably."

"Do you suppose they'll be arrested in Kimley?" I asked. "You know, they killed that Pete Bain at Stanton; Bottom said he did."

"Yes," said Ned, "but when I was listening he said he chucked his body down an old mine shaft where they'd never find him. Just to think," he added after a pause, his eyes glowing, "just to think that we'd be meeting real bloody murderers!"

"There it is!" Hal cried suddenly and pointed down the river. "Isn't that Whalen's Bluff?"

Ned and I turned and looked. Sure enough, it was Whalen's Bluff, the upper part of it: a high cliff straight ahead of us, against which the river broke and turned at right angles. It stood up sheer from the river, pure white under the glare of the sun, with green trees waving on its summit. As we approached, we could see more cliffs, one after the other, rising white from the water: the whole long line of them

WE PITCH CAMP

known as Whalen's Bluff. The river here was deep and green, with hardly any current: so deep in fact that people said that off Whalen's Bluff you couldn't find the bottom. At the other end of the bluff, about a quarter of a mile further, the river turned again and shot down a rapids straight westward. Here at the turn was a wide gravel-bar, lying between the river and a dense wood.

"Let's camp on the bluff," suggested Ned. "It'll be pretty there when the moon comes up."

"But we'll be too far away from the lines," Hal objected. "We're going to put the lines in just above and below the rapids, aren't we? Those are the best places."

"Best places to catch minnows," said Ned scornfully. "We ought to fish out here in the deep water and catch a big one."

"Nothing but gars and turtles out here," said Hal. "You won't catch any fish here. Besides, when the dog-gone moon does come up we won't catch any fish anywhere. I hope it rains."

"Rains!" cried Ned. "And us without a tent!"

"Well," persisted Hal, shaking his head, "we got to keep the moon hid."

Now, whether we caught any fish or not, I certainly preferred sleeping out on the gravel-bar where everything was clear. On top of the cliff there was a thick wood; you couldn't tell what might be up there at night. So I said:

"Well, Ned, it might be all right to fish here in the deep water near the bluff, if we only had big-

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fish bait; but we've only got worms, and big fish don't bite on worms."

But Hal objected to that.

"All *you* know about it, Bert Cunningham," said he. "Jiminy Chrismus, you can catch a ten-pounder with worms, and that's big enough for me."

"Well, that's true," I admitted. "But then, Ned, if you want to try a few casts for bass you'll have to go way down on the gravel-bar. There's no bass-weed up here."

Ned swallowed my bait.

"Gee, I forgot all about that! All right, let's camp on the gravel-bar."

In a few minutes we had landed our boat on the long stretch of gravel and started to unload her.

"There's a fine place to camp," said I, pointing to a monster of a log, about six feet in diameter, that lay on the bar about half way between the river and the wood. One end of it rested on a hummock of sand, and with its long tangled roots sticking out in every direction it resembled a gigantic octopus stranded high and dry.

"Now, Hal," said Ned briskly, "you take the coffee-pot and go over to Aunt Mary Stanley's and get some water. Bert and I will pitch camp and make everything snug."

"All right," said Hal reluctantly. "But don't you go putting in the lines till I get back."

"Oh, we won't monkey with the lines," Ned assured him; and Hal put off across the bar towards the wood. I can see him to this day as he disappeared

WE PITCH CAMP

beneath the tall trees, a mere mite of a figure trudging along and swinging the coffee-pot by his side.

As Ned had promised, we made everything snug. We cleared a smooth place on top of the sand-bank and spread our blankets there. Then we got out our hatchet, and I cut off a lot of dry roots from the log, and Ned piled them where we were going to build our fire, just down from the elevation upon which we had laid our blankets.

“That’s enough wood,” said Ned; “give me the hatchet.” He pulled a couple of nails out of our provision-box and drove them into the log. “We’ll make this our kitchen, here near the fire;” and he hung up the skillet on one nail and the flitch of bacon on the other. Then he drew up the box and placed it just beneath the bacon. “Now over here,” he went on, “we’ll have our gun-room.” And he set the rifle and his rod against the log.

“Our fishing kit should go there too,” I suggested, “and the lantern and oil-can and bucket of worms.”

Then we stood back and surveyed our little camp. Everything was shipshape.

By this time Hal had returned with the water, and we two, Ned and I,—for Hal had drunk his fill at the well—half emptied the coffee-pot.

“What are we going to do for coffee now?” wondered Ned.

“Oh, that’s all right,” said Hal; “fill her from the river. What about putting in the lines? It’s about time, isn’t it?”

Ned screwed his eyes at the sun.

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“About half-past four, I’d say.”

“Well,” I suggested, “you two put in the lines, and I’ll get supper.”

They agreed to that and went off with the trot-lines and worms. I got the fire started and then walked across to the river to fill up the coffee-pot. Ned and Hal were near the opposite shore just above the rapids, tying one end of the trot-line to a stump.

While filling the pot I noticed that the water was not nearly so clear as it had been earlier in the afternoon. It looked murky and clouded.

“Oh, well,” I thought, “it won’t make any difference after it’s boiled.”

CHAPTER IV

The Thing in the River

WELL, after a considerable time Ned and Hal returned. Though Hal was all for setting out both lines, Ned said that one was enough; that we ought to try the fishing first before we went to the trouble of setting out two lines. I imagine he was tired of handling those squirming worms.

When supper was over we sat and talked for a while, and then I proposed taking a swim. But Hal said there was no telling, it might scare the fish; and we shouldn't take any chances.

"Shucks," said I, "we won't be anywhere near the line. We'll swim out there where the river bends around." I meant the little bay which the river forms on this side before it swings into the rapids.

"Well, I know what I'm going to do," Ned declared, and began piecing together his rod. "I'm going down along the bar and try a few casts. There's some dandy bass-weed below here."

But Hal and I went swimming. As we reached the margin of the river the sun was just going down. It was a glorious sight, that sunset. The clouds were piled up in the western sky one above the other, and all of different colors — crimson and yellow and violet and deep purple and pink and a sort of blue, too. And right at the foot of this great heap of broken

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and jumbled rainbow burned the sun; and all along the horizon, close down, the sky looked like molten gold, and the sun himself like a great glowing nugget that was being melted. And the river, too, looked like a golden river, for I was gazing straight downstream into the heart of the sunset.

"Look, Hal!" I exclaimed; "isn't that beautiful!"

"Yeah," said he, without turning his head. And then, "O boy, but the water's fine!" he cried, and swallowed and kicked out of sheer delight.

I waded in. Indeed, the water was fine! I struck out for midstream and then floated down to the turn where the river was shallower. Hal had followed me, and when we let down we were standing waist-deep. It was then that I noticed for the first time the utter change in the color of the water.

"Look at that water, Hal," said I. "It's muddy!"

"Must 'a' had a big storm up above somewhere," said he. "Gee, but this will make the fish bite! I wish we'd 'a' put in that other line. If the darn' moon would only stay down!" And he cast a frowning eye up over Whalen's Bluff.

"It's funny," said I, "that the water wasn't muddy over there in the bend."

"That's backwater," said he; "it hasn't reached there yet. Say!" he added eagerly, "let's run the line when Ned comes back. We ought to have some good ones swinging on."

We swam around a little longer, then got out and donned our clothes. The sun was below the horizon now, and twilight was fast coming in. It was queer

THE THING IN THE RIVER

how everything seemed to change now that the sun had set. Somehow there was a kind of lonely feeling in the air that made us want to keep close together. The frogs had begun their chorus all along the river, and over in the wood an owl screeched: a weird sound.

"I wish Ned would hurry and come," said I.

"There he is now," said Hal, and pointed towards the camp. "He must 'a' been putting up his fishing pole. Catch anything?" he asked as Ned came up.

"Nup," answered Ned very shortly. (He had very likely snarled his line beyond repair, I thought.) "Going to run the line?"

"Yes," said I. "You two fellows run the line, and I'll make things ready for the night. Fix up a bit. I'll make some coffee too."

When they had shoved off, I went back to camp and fetched another pot of water for the coffee. Then I laid in some more wood and built up the fire. Taking the rifle, I slipped a few more cartridges into the magazine and set it up against the log nearer our blankets. I sat down then and watched Ned and Hal out on the river.

Darkness was coming on apace now, and I got quite lonesome, sitting there all by myself. I glanced over my shoulder at the wood behind me and was a little startled at what I saw; and yet the sight was pretty too. The whole wood was aglow with fireflies. Against the black background of the trees they gleamed like spangles. And then I heard an owl cry away off somewhere, and I suppose I shuddered a little. I know I threw another billet of wood on

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the fire and made the flame leap up. And then I heard Ned shout.

“Whoopee! We got a whopper! Ten pounds if he’s an ounce!”

I ran over to the river.

“What kind is he?” I yelled.

“A channel-cat,” Hal answered. “But he’s not ten pounds; doing good if he weighs six.”

“I’ll bet you a thousand dollars he weighs ten pounds,” I heard Ned say.

I sat down on the gravel and waited. It was quite dark now, and I could see only the gleam of the lantern across the river; I could not make out the boat at all. It was very still too; I could hear the least sound. Of course, there was the continual low murmur of the river; but that wasn’t any sound, any more than the trees or stars were sounds. It was so still that I could hear everything Ned and Hal said: I even heard the channel-cat flop in the boat.

Presently, as I sat there, I noticed that the trees across the river grew a little brighter, and looking up, I saw the moon, obscured by a veil of cloud, rising over behind Whalen’s Bluff. Indeed, as I now remarked, the whole sky seemed to be overcast; it was only here and there that I could make out the stars between the rifts of cloud. There wouldn’t be much of a moon after all, I judged.

“All right, that’s the last hook,” I heard Hal say. And then I saw the lantern move across the water, and faintly discerned the outline of the boat.

THE THING IN THE RIVER

“What’d you get?” I asked, as the boat grated on the gravel.

“Two nice stone-perch, a little cat, and the big fellow,” answered Hal. “They’re biting all right; every worm gone.”

Ned lifted the fish-bag, and I saw the curved white belly of the channel-cat. He looked easily to be ten pounds. He certainly was a fine fish.

We pulled the boat half way out of the water then, and tied the fish-bag fast to the stern thwart, dropping it over the side.

“Gee!” said Hal as we trudged back to camp, “I hope it stays cloudy so’s the moon can’t come out. We ought to catch a lot to-night.”

As for myself, I was wishing the moon *would* come out, clear and full; the night would not have been so ghost-like then.

When we got back to camp we set the fire a-blazing brightly, and I poured out a round of coffee. The night air was chilly, but the coffee warmed us up. Then we all sat down around the fire, and Ned took the rifle across his knees.

“What would you do, Bert,” said he, “if a catamount would leap on your back?”

I turned quickly and looked behind me. Beyond the circle of firelight there was an outline of the wood against the black-gray sky, and lower great glooms of darkness. I shifted my position slightly.

“You don’t think there are any catamounts around here, do you?” I asked, just a trifle uneasy.

“No telling,” said he in a low voice.

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Well, after that we sat silent for a long time. And then Ned got up and went to the top of the bank and wrapped himself up in his blanket.

“Wake me up when you’re going to run the line,” said he, and the next moment was sound asleep.

It was about a half hour later, I suppose, when I felt a hand shake my shoulder. I too had fallen asleep, sitting there before the fire.

“Come on, Bert,” said Hal. “Let’s run the line.”

I jumped to my feet, rubbing my eyes. The fire had fallen to a glowing bed of coals. The night was pitch-dark, the moon being hid by a thick blanket of clouds; and there was a feeling of rain in the air.

“Gee,” said I, “I hope it doesn’t rain.”

“Make the fishin’ better,” Hal promptly returned. “Ned, O Ned.” He caught him by the leg. “Wake up, we’re going to run the line, Bert and I. You watch camp.”

Ned stood up sleepily.

“All right, go ahead. I’ll fix up the fire.”

When we got down to the river we saw that the water had risen clear up to the peg to which we had moored the boat.

“There must ‘a’ been a mighty big storm up above,” was all Hal said; and we got in and shoved off.

Hal ran the line while I sat in the stern and held the lantern. It was intensely dark. Two yards beyond the boat on either side was sheer blackness. Even the line of treetops on the opposite bank of the river I could just barely make out. And away

THE THING IN THE RIVER

down in the direction of the gravel-bar gleamed a point of light that marked our campfire.

We didn't speak much, Hal and I. Somehow you don't think about talking when you are out in the hush of the night, running a line; everything is so very still. And then, too, you are always expecting to see the swirl of a fish's tail in the light of your lantern.

So I sat there, listening to the gurgle of the water about the prow and watching the line come out of the river as Hal baited hook after hook. Round chunks of foam, about the size of a platter, slid past us, and now and then pieces of driftwood. The river was rising.

Hal suddenly plunged the line below the surface.

“The dip-net, Bert, quick! He's a good one!”

I handed him the net, and then, very carefully, he raised the line. The next moment we heard a tremendous splashing out in the darkness, and the line sawed up and down in Hal's hands.

“Lord, he's a big one!” Hal whispered tensely, and again ducked the line into the water. Then he began cautiously to work over; but the splashing had ceased. We went along for about ten yards then, but there was no further sign of a fish.

“Lost him, Bert,” said Hal, and there was tragedy in his voice.

“Gee, that's hard luck,” said I. “I'll bet he weighed twenty pounds.”

“Well, hardly twenty,” said he. “I'd put it at

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fifteen. He was a channel-cat too, I could tell the way he pulled."

But, though we had lost the big fellow, we caught a beautiful five-pound stone-perch about midstream. I had to keep my feet on him to prevent his flopping out of the boat.

"One more sinker," said Hal, lifting the line; "and I've got her off the bottom now. I don't feel anything, so I guess that's all."

We were then about twenty yards from the shore.

"Here she is," said Hal, as he raised the rock, dripping and shining, out of the water. "Hold the lantern up, Bert, so's we can have a look. There are seven more hooks."

I lifted the lantern, shielded it with my coat and peered out on the river. I saw, faintly, the mark of the line on the surface of the water. But, even as I looked, it gave a violent heave downward, and the rock on the thwart at Hal's elbow plumped off into the river.

"Keep the lantern up, Bert!" Hal cried. "He's on, all right. Jiminy, he's a whale!"

Hal had drawn the rock into the boat again and was bending over the line.

But just then I saw something wave up out of the water that made my belly crawl with horror.

"My God, Hal!" I cried. "There's a human hand!"

CHAPTER V

Tom Crawford?

“**A** HUMAN hand!” gasped Hal. “Where?”
Either I had been dreaming or—

“There it is again!” I cried. Not only a hand this time but a man’s whole forearm emerged from the dark sliding water, and then disappeared. “Great heavens, Hal, it’s no fish we’ve caught; it’s a human body!”

There was no doubt of it now. We could see the body plainly as it rolled and pitched in the foaming current: now the shoulders would appear, now an arm, now the white face — a ghastly sight — with the hair swept smoothly back from the forehead.

We came alongside it, and Hal raised the line. By the lantern-light I could see the terror in his eyes. My own, I suppose, betrayed an equal fright.

“Shall I cut the snoods, Bert? There are three of them hooked in his clothes. We must have caught him when I lifted the line to the surface.”

“No, don’t cut them,” said I. “Let’s take the body ashore and bury it decently.”

With a sensation of unutterable abhorrence I laid hold of the dead man’s arm and began pulling him over the gunwale of the boat. It was a gruesome business, this fishing out a dead body.

As Hal rowed back to shore, I sat in the stern con-

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templating our awful catch. It lay huddled at my feet, its head resting against the side of the boat. As I looked at it I could not help thinking of our afternoon's experience and of how Jerry Bottom had threatened to murder one of his companions. Was this, perhaps, the man? Was this Tom Crawford?

I raised the lantern and scanned the face closely; I had never seen it before. But then neither had I seen Tom Crawford; he had still been behind the bushes, I remembered, when we passed them. The face before me now was a lean brown-bearded face with large blue eyes staring horribly up at the lantern.

"Hal," said I, "I wonder if this is that Crawford fellow those men threatened to kill this afternoon?"

"I was just thinking of that. . . . Hold the lantern a little higher, Bert; I think we're near the bar now."

But we were still a good way from shore, I judged, as I could make nothing out. I lowered the light again, but in the act I must have uttered a cry, for Hal stopped rowing.

"What's the matter, Bert?"

"Look!" I cried, and pointed at the dead man's head. It had fallen over from its position against the boat's side, revealing the bare neck.

"Good Lord!" Hal exclaimed. "What did that?"

"The hand of Jerry Bottom," said I. "He alone could have done it."

Just beneath the dead man's chin the throat was torn violently away; a big reeking hole, with shreds of flesh still clinging at its edges, gaped hideously.

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“The Crawford man,” I declared, “sure as you’re born! Jerry Bottom ripped the throat out of him and threw him into the river to drown.”

I shuddered at my own words. I could even then see the monster committing the bloody deed.

Our boat grated on the bar, and I sprang out. We hallooed Ned and then lifted the body out of the boat and laid it on the ground. Presently we heard Ned’s footstep on the gravel, and a moment later he appeared in the circle of lantern-light, a pencil in one hand and his note-book in the other.

“I’ve just been jotting down an account of our first day out. I—” He stopped, catching sight of the thing on the ground; and then lifted his eyes to us. “What—what’s this?”

“I’m afraid it’s Tom Crawford,” said I. “We caught him on the trot-line. Jerry Bottom murdered him all right. Look.” And I threw back the dead man’s head.

Ned didn’t say anything for a while; only gazed in a kind of fascinated horror at the sight. Then,

“Have you searched the clothes for anything that would tell who he is?” he asked.

The thought of going through the dead man’s pockets was to me simply revolting. It seemed like a sort of sacrilege.

“Lord, are you going to do that, Ned!”

“We’ve got to, if we want to find out who he is.” And he knelt down at the side of the body and felt one of the coat-pockets. But I noticed how his hand shook.

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"Hold the light closer," he said. "It's got to be done." And then the three of us bent over the prostrate form while Ned rapidly went through the clothes.

In one of the trouser-pockets he found a quarter and two pennies, and slipped them back again without a word. Then, from the inside coat-pocket he drew out a water-soaked envelope bearing neither stamp nor address, and handed it over to me. The remainder of the search revealed nothing but a few crumbs of wet tobacco and five or six headless matches.

Ned turned to me.

"Let's see what's in the envelope. I guess it'll give us a clue as to who he is."

Bending over the lantern, Ned opened the envelope, took out a tintype picture and held it to the light. It was the image of a pretty young girl dressed all in white: no name, no writing, just the picture. In silence Ned thrust the tintype back into the coat-pocket. Then he examined the envelope again and found a thin folded sheet of writing-paper. It was a letter, written hastily with a pencil, without name, date or address. It began, "Dear Pal," and was signed, "Yours truly, W. J. F."

This certainly didn't throw much light on the dead man's identity. True, if it were he who wrote the letter, then he was scarcely the same man as Tom Crawford. For, evidently, W. J. F. were not Tom Crawford's initials. Nor were the contents of the letter any the more enlightening. As I remember it,

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the writer was relating his meeting with a crabbed old person who was unwilling to trade a horse. I forget the precise details, but at all events the letter did not give us an inkling as to the dead man's name, although it led us to infer that he might have been a horse-dealer.

Ned read the letter aloud and then tossed it aside; and the three of us stood up, with the dead man at our feet, and looked at one another.

"Well, the only thing to do," said I, "is to bury him. We can't do it very well without a shovel, but there's a lot of loose sand between our camp and the wood. We could scoop out a sort of grave with our hands and cover him with sand."

"First, we'd better make the boat fast," warned Hal. He stepped over to the water's edge. "Gee, but the river's rising! It's backed up two feet at least since we've been talking."

We hunted about for something, then, to which we might moor the boat, but the only thing we found was the stump of a log sticking out of the bar about ten yards from the water. It was solid enough, being buried deep in the gravel. I cut off a piece of the trot-line which we hadn't used, and attached one end of it to the painter. The other end we knotted securely around the stump. Then we put our stone-perch in the fish-bag and tied the bag to the boat, just giving it enough slack to lie in the water.

"That'll be all right," said Ned. "The river won't rise much further. Now Hal, take the lantern, and Bert and I will carry the — the body."

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It must have been a strange procession we made as we crossed the bar in the pitch-black night, with Hal in front swinging the lantern and Ned and I stumbling along behind with our awful burden.

When we reached the spot beyond the camp we fell to work quickly and silently, scooping out the soft sand. It was a hard job, and we had to pause occasionally and rest. But when we would turn and see the dead man lying there next to us, his wide eyes staring into his shallow grave, we didn't need further coaxing, I can tell you, to begin our work again. I can see the picture to this day: In the cup of light, within that immense darkness, we are there on our knees, hastily throwing out double handfuls of sand and ever and again glancing askance at the thing that lay so stark and awsome at our side.

Our task was done at last. Into its makeshift grave we laid the body, crossed the arms on its breast, and covered it with sand till we had built up a considerable mound. Then we got up and gazed in silence at the last resting place of the unknown man whom we had taken from the river.

“Poor devil,” said Ned at length, “I wonder if he *was* murdered. . . . I wonder where he is now.”

“Let’s say a prayer for him,” Hal suggested, and without further word the three of us knelt down in the sand and prayed for the repose of his soul. I prayed for ourselves too, and asked Our Lady to take care of us, for I had a feeling that great perils lay before us.

We went back to camp then and decided to break

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the night up into watches. It was all of eleven o'clock, we judged, and accordingly we apportioned the watches from eleven to one, from one to three, and from three till it should be time for the first run of the trot-line. We had agreed that we wouldn't go out on the river again that night, doubtless on account of our recent experience; our spirits were more than a little subdued, as you may suppose.

We drew straws for the watches, and I got the first, Ned the second, and Hal the third. We had no timepiece, so we left it to the guess of the one on duty to determine when his two hours should be up.

"Now you fellows roll in," said I, bustling about the fire. "Two hours go by mighty quick when you're asleep."

But it was a good while before either of them dropped off. They snuggled down into their blankets with the best of intentions, while I got into a comfortable attitude near the blazing fire. But before long Ned raised his head.

"Do you think that *was* Tom Crawford?" he asked.

"I don't know. Looks like it. Go to sleep."

He pillow'd his head on his arm again. Then, after a little while, Hal sat up suddenly.

"Where'd we leave those worms, Bert?"

"Way up on the bar. The river can't get at 'em. They're all right."

He lay back once more, but five minutes had not elapsed before I heard him roll over.

"Bert?"

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“Well?”

“Say, I’ll bet we have some dandies swinging on by morning.”

“I hope so. Better keep still; Ned’s sleeping.”

“Shucks,” grunted Ned from the folds of his blanket, “I’m not sleeping. I’m thinking about that hole in the dead man’s neck. I wonder if Jerry Bottom did do that.”

I made no answer, for I knew that if I did they would never get to sleep. I just sat there silent, facing the fire, with my back against the log and the rifle across my knees. And shortly after my silence took effect, for I heard their deep regular breathing and knew that both had fallen sound asleep at last.

CHAPTER VI

Ned Swims for the “Big Cat”

BUT now came the lonely part of my watch. As long as I knew that Ned and Hal were awake I had the comfort of conscious companionship; with both of them now asleep, although so near, I felt as if I were all alone in that wild spot. And the feeling did not add to my peace of mind.

How long I sat there, watching the fire die slowly down, I really do not know. In effect it must have been only a little over an hour, though it seemed to me ages and ages. I was aware of this, and consequently did not call Ned, for I didn’t wish him to stand any portion of my watch.

As the minutes dragged by and the fire sank low and lower, I sat and listened to the mysterious noises around me. From time to time there trembled on the night air the lonely wail of an owl somewhere in the wood; the rising river murmured unceasingly, and from all sides came the sharp staccato of frogs. And once, far off in the darkness, sounded a high crackling cry, like an evil laugh. I shifted the rifle a little on my knees.

And then somehow—perhaps because I was thinking of him—my eyes wandered to that point in the thick gloom where, I knew, the dead man lay. I half fancied that I could discern the long low mound; it

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was indeed quite close, not twenty-five paces from where I sat. I fell to wondering what I should do if his pale face with its staring eyes should thrust itself within the circle of firelight; if I should suddenly see the white neck with its deep dark wound.

I wrenched my mind away from the image. It was sheer folly, I knew, to allow myself to dwell on it. I should merely be working myself up to a groundless fright. I kicked the unburned end of a stick into the coals. It sent up a cheerful spray of sparks, a flame broke out, and I leaned back once more against the log.

The night wore on. I replenished the fire, and as the flames leaped higher, casting a larger circle of light, I took a turn up and down to relax the stiffness of my legs. Then I resumed my old position, having made up my mind to call Ned in about fifteen minutes. My watch, I judged, was nearly over.

Indeed, the night was getting old. The leopard-frogs along the river margin had now ceased to cry; and it was only at long intervals that I heard the far boom of a bullfrog. Even the owl had left off his weird wailing. All things were hushed, with that deep hush that falls after the midnight hour. There would be life and sound later—even an hour later—but now the night was steeped in stillness.

A piece of the firewood, burnt through, fell inward with a soft crash. I started up and rubbed my eyes. I had been nodding and dozing; and I thought I was wide awake!

I took the rifle then and went up on the bank

NED SWIMS FOR THE "BIG CAT"

where the other two were sleeping. I would get settled first and then rouse Ned.

I wrapt myself up comfortably in my blanket and reached out a hand to shake his shoulder. The fire-light was on his face, and I could see that he was sound, sound asleep. I didn't have the heart to awake him at once, so I lay there for a while gazing down into the flames of the dying fire. And as I gazed, the flames began to play a sort of game: they were trying to outleap one another. First one would start up and mount high and higher, and all of a sudden collapse. Then another would shoot straight up, only to flicker back into the bed of coals. A third would follow and then a fourth; and both would die down together. Then another. . . .

I opened my eyes and looked up into a dull, leaden sky that was full of a fine rain, like a rolling mist. I could not tell whether it were five o'clock of the morning or nine; the pale gray light might have belonged to either hour. But at all events it was morning, and I had fallen asleep without waking Ned!

I tossed aside my wet blanket and sat up; the sight that met my eyes quite dumbfounded me.

Water was all about us, a wide yellow sea of it; and we three were marooned on a tiny island in the vast expanse. Gravel-bar was gone and the scrub willows along the margin. The only object visible between me and the opposite bank (which seemed a tremendous distance away) was our boat, standing still as if by magic out there on the surface of the

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river. The great log under which we had cooked our supper had almost wholly disappeared. The end with the tangle of roots, which rested half way up on our mound, was the only part of it above water.

"Hey, you fellows! Wake up! The river's risen and washed us out!"

They opened their eyes, jumped to their feet, and looked around with faces full of wonder and dismay.

"It was my fault, fellows," I said. "I fell asleep just when I was going to wake Ned. I'm sorry as the deuce. I —"

"Oh, that's all right," said Ned, but I could see that he was pretty sore. "No time now for apologies and such things. We're in a pickle, fellows, and we have to get out of it." He turned towards the wood beyond our camp. "Look at that water out there; why, it's over my head by that sycamore tree!" He stopped and wheeled about, looking at Hal and me. His face wore a very solemn expression; but there was no longer any fear in his eyes. "It's not a pickle we're in, fellows; it's danger, mortal danger!"

I looked over at the wood and saw the strong current sweeping logs and brush and tangled grape-vines pell-mell among the tree-trunks; and I realized that no human being could live in such a torrent.

"One of us has to swim for that boat," continued Ned. "It's our only hope of safety. If the river rises another six inches it might carry this mound from under our feet."

"Well," said I, "I'll swim for it."

"No you won't," declared Ned. "You and Hal

NED SWIMS FOR THE "BIG CAT"

stay here. I'm the oldest, and it's only right that I should run the risk. You and Hal can fish around here and try to find some of our kit. Most of it is washed away though, I guess."

"But look here, Ned," I protested, "this is all my fault. I am the one that fell asleep, and I ought to swim for the boat. I'm not a bit afraid, honest. And I can make it, I know."

Though I spoke with so much assurance, my judgment told me that, whichever of us undertook the task, our chances of accomplishing it were very slender. In the first place, there was a powerful current to stem; from where we stood on our bit of sand we could see the whole vast surface of yellow water moving irresistibly onward. Huge trees, torn roots and all from the bank, were now being swept on the bosom of the stream as though they were but toothpicks. True, we were somewhat above the position of the boat, but not, I should say, over twenty yards; which meant that the swimmer must work towards the boat and against the current at the same time. Then, if he should fail to get to the boat, he would have to swim downstream for a mile or more perhaps ere he made the other shore. And considering how tired he would be after the struggle to reach the boat, and considering, too, the difficulty in landing among the branches and bushes of a new bank, to say nothing of the danger from the floating trees and masses of wrack, the odds were certainly against his ever attaining the opposite shore alive.

These thoughts, of course, rushed through my mind

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in a mere fraction of the time it takes to tell of them. Indeed, the peril of the swim I had seen at a glance. All the same I was still determined to make the hazardous venture.

"No," Ned replied; "I go now, and that's an end of it."

"Then we both go," I doggedly returned, and began taking off my shoes.

"Toss up for it," suggested Hal brightly. "Here's a stick." He spat on one end. "Wet end goes."

He threw it up between us. It came down, stuck upright for an instant in the sand, and then fell over. The dry end pointed my way.

"You see," said Ned, and began struggling out of his shirt.

Hal had gathered together whatever of our belongings the water had not reached, and these were few indeed: our blankets, the rifle, and the lantern we had luckily hung on one of the high roots near the sand-bank. These were piled in the middle of our little island which at present covered a space not much larger than an ordinary dinner-table. The water had risen even since I had awaked.

Ned turned and pointed to our possessions.

"If I don't make it, fellows, you'd better let this stuff go. Stay here as long as you can of course. But if you see that the river is going to keep on rising, you'd better take off your clothes and strike out for the other side. You'll be drowned like rats over there in those woods."

And then, as he made ready to plunge into the

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swollen river, the full realization of the danger he was incurring struck him, I believe, for the first time. It was not that he said anything much; it was rather his manner that told me. He turned to us quietly and held out his hand. We took it, Hal and I, one after the other, and gripped it hard.

"You'll say a prayer when I'm swimming?" he asked, and his eyes were very grave.

"Shucks," said Hal, "you'll make it all right."

Ned smiled.

"Well, I'd better go." He pointed to the boat. "Look how her old nose is buried down in the current. See her buck! There must be a terrific strain on that trot-line. Gee, it was sure a lucky thing we gave her that much rope last night. Well, here goes."

He waded straight upstream till the water was under his armpits. Even at that he had gone only six or seven feet—just down the incline of our mound. Then he turned, smiling.

"*Big Cat* or bust!" he cried, and struck out.

It was a gallant fight he made; Hal and I, with heart in mouth, watched him every inch of the way.

It had left off drizzling now, and the day was lighter. Plainly visible, the boat lay out on the stream just half the length of a football field away and at most some twenty yards below us. These twenty yards were the bare odds in Ned's favor.

Lord, how he swam! Plunging forward with the overhand stroke, he fought his way half against the current and half towards the opposite shore. One white arm would flash up and then the other; he was

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working with the precision of a machine and yet with the desperate energy of a human being battling for his own life and the lives of others. Sometimes when he took an unusually powerful stroke his shoulders, the muscles knotted by the struggle, would rise clear of the water; and the tawny current would froth and gurgle beneath his breast. And once, as he threw a glance backwards, I saw his black hair streaming in his eyes: but on his lips was the same brave smile.

He was half way across now, and still a good ten yards above the prow. There was yet a chance of his reaching the goal! But, shifting my eyes for the briefest moment, I saw a great mass of driftwood bearing down towards the boat. Then my gaze switched back to Ned. With the same strong strokes, betraying not the slightest sign of weakness, he was lustily stemming the yellow flood. I glanced again at the heap of brush; to my dismay I saw that it would cut in between Ned and the boat. Ned must have seen this too, for his arms came out of the water with redoubled energy and rapidity. It was no longer a question merely of his making the boat; he must make it ahead of that ominous mass of floating brush.

He was swimming now in a kind of leaping frenzy. Once, as his right arm shot forward in the air, I saw his face, and on it was written the whole agony of the struggle. He was all but petered out; his gaping mouth showed his terrible exhaustion. . . . Five yards remained, and now he swam just even with the stern; and the nose of the brush-wrack was sliding past the prow.

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With a last supreme effort he almost lifted himself out of the water and strained forward to the swaying boat-end. One arm went up for the goal, but in the very act the boat veered slightly in the current, the arm fell back, and the fatal brush-wrack, floating by, swept from sight all trace of our brave and gallant comrade.

CHAPTER VII

Rough-Handled by the River

“HE’S gone,” groaned Hal.

“No, look!” I cried. “The boat is loose!”

And so in fact it was. The tail of the brush-drift, swinging over, had struck the prow. The blow was slight, a mere push, but it had been sufficient to snap the already weakened trot-line. With a lilt upwards the boat had sheered half way round and was now floating behind the mass of drifting wood.

But where was Ned?

“Yes, he’s gone,” repeated Hal with a kind of moan. “The brush-drift’s got him.”

Strain our eyes as we might, we could discern no sign of Ned on that yellow moving surface. He was sucked under the deadly drift and was now being whirled along, a lifeless corpse, beneath the flood.

“Stay here, Hal,” I said; “I’ll swim for the boat. I can get it now; it’s loose. And maybe I can find some trace of Ned.”

He answered nothing. I glanced at him: he was gazing anxiously out on the broad river, and tears were in his eyes; his face was white, and his nether lip quivered.

In a trice I had off my clothes, and stood balancing myself for the plunge. And then I heard Hal give a great cry that was half a sob.

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“Oh! Oh there! Look!”

I did look, and the sight made me shout for joy. Over the farther gunwale of the boat a white arm was clinging.

“He’s got her! He’s got her!” Hal cried. “He’s safe, Bert, he’s safe!”

I cupped my hands about my mouth and hallooed across the water. A faint cry came back in answer, and a moment later another arm was slung over the side of the boat; and then a black head appeared. Ned had reached the goal at last!

But he was exhausted utterly. He had not strength enough to climb aboard. His head lay sideways on the gunwale between his two arms; and we could see, even at that distance, that he was blowing as though his lungs must burst.

“He’s too weak to get in, Hal,” I said. “You stay here; I’m going after him.” And I plunged in.

It was an easy matter, of course, to make the boat now. I was swimming downstream; in fact the distance down was further than the distance across. Twenty yards or so from the boat I called out:

“Hold on, Ned! I’m coming!” But I received no answer.

A great fear suddenly laid hold of me. What if he had dropped from the boat’s side through sheer exhaustion! Six long strokes brought me up behind the stern, and I raised my head and looked over. Panting and shaking, Ned still clung to the gunwale, his head resting between his arms.

“Hold tight, old man!” I cried. “I’m here!”

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And I drew myself over the stern and into the boat.

It was a matter of only a few moments to haul him aboard. I placed him in the stern seat, took up the oars, fitted them into the locks, and started upstream.

“How do you feel now, Ned?” I asked.

He raised his head and smiled wanly, the kind of smile I have since seen on his lips when, all bruised and battered, he would walk off the gridiron after having smashed interference to pieces for sixty minutes. His hair was in his eyes, and his face looked white and hollow.

“Pretty well,” he answered. And then, after a pause, “I thought I was gone, Bert,” he added and shuddered a little.

For a while neither of us spoke, and I pulled on up the river. The day was growing brighter now; the clouds were breaking up, and patches of blue sky, like jagged slabs of turquoise, began to appear. Presently the sun burst out, covering with his brilliance the wide river and its green banks. I rested on my oars and looked up over my shoulder. It was towards ten o’clock of the morning, I thought.

What a wonderful transformation the welcome sunlight wrought upon everything! My spirits rose like a lark, and I heaved to on the oars with a will. Ned’s color came back to his cheeks, and he fell to whistling a merry tune as though the dreadful incident of five minutes ago had never occurred at all. The broad river shone like gold and moved along so smoothly and majestically in the fresh morning light that you would never suppose destruction and death

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lay at the ruthless heart of it. The trees along the flooded shore-line looked like tall, green and gold plumes as the sunbeams sparkled among their waving tops and the water flowed evenly about their boles.

Indeed, it was an odd sight to see the river so far back in the woods. It looked as if the trees had all run helter-skelter towards the water and had run so fast that when they came to the bank they couldn't stop but must go on till they got stuck in the bottom away out there and couldn't get back.

I was just thinking of this when all of a sudden I heard Hal's voice shout out: "O Bert, Bert! Hurry up!"

I whisked around in my seat, but a wooded promontory cut off all sight of him. You see, we had drifted quite a quarter of a mile downstream before we began to row back, and the current had carried us towards our shore and in behind this head of trees. I couldn't imagine what the trouble might be, but I bent to my oars nevertheless harder than ever. Ned shouted that we were coming, and called my strokes, and gave me directions now and then to avoid the driftwood.

Before we rounded the point of trees Ned must have spied Hal; for he uttered a sharp cry and his eyes lighted with excitement.

"Don't turn to look, Bert," he cried. "Pull, pull like the dickens! I'll tell you what's the matter. More on your left! More on your left! You'll hit these last trees! . . . There now, on your right, hard! Hard! Now straight! . . . Hal's standing ankle-

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deep in water. You can't see any land at all. It looks like he's standing on top of the river. (We're coming, Hal!) He's got the blankets under one arm and our clothes under the other. . . . Yes, and he's got the rifle and the lantern too! Lord! I hope the river doesn't wash that mound away before we get there. (Hang on to our clothes, Hal, as long as you can! But if the mound goes, drop everything!) There's a log! On your left, Bert, quick! . . . All right, straight. Hard now, only twenty more yards!"

And then, as I strained at my oars, I heard Hal cry, "She's going, fellows!" I looked into Ned's face as I bent forward for a stroke; his whole being was concentrated in his gaze. I couldn't resist the temptation; I glanced over my shoulder upon the backward swing; and what I saw transfixed me with amazement.

Hal, his arms filled with blankets and clothes and in his hands the rifle and lantern, was standing as by a miracle knee-deep on the surface of the broad waters. But even as I looked I saw that he was sinking. Dragging on my oars again, I heaved back and with the tail of my eye caught sight of him just as the yellow flood closed over his head.

My breath was coming in gasps now. It had been a terrific pull up against that current. Yet I worked on. Ned was bending forward, his hands clutching the sides of the boat.

"There he is!" he suddenly cried. "On your left, Bert! This way, Hal! . . . Lord, he's under again! What's the matter with him? cramps, or what? . . .

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Ship oars, Bert!" And Ned stood up in the boat, ready to dive to Hal's rescue.

I had just got the oars in when Hal's head pops up not six feet to our right. He still had his cap on, and was spluttering and blowing hard; and in his eyes was a look of mild reproach.

"If you fellows don't help me," he gasped, "I'll have to drop this stuff!" The plucky little rascal was treading water and hadn't let go of a thing!

Ned leaped in and caught him under the arm. Then I reached them an oar, and after a difficult time both at last got aboard. Sure enough, Hal had our three blankets, our clothes, the lantern, and the rifle. Once more we were all together in the good ship *Big Cat*.

"Now," said Ned, "the first thing to do is find out how much of our outfit is left."

"No," said Hal, "the first thing to do is to see if we have any matches; and if we have we ought to put 'em on the seat here to dry. It would be pretty tough without a fire."

Of course, it didn't occur to any of us to throw up the cards and make our way over to Fairdale. We had been washed out completely; practically all our belongings were gone, and we had no food. But such minor difficulties didn't bother us; we had a boat and the river still ran to Valley Junction.

Acting on Hal's suggestion, we searched our clothes and found in all thirty matches. Hal must have counted them, I think, or I shouldn't remember the number so well. We laid them out carefully on the

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bow thwart so that the sun's rays fell on them, and then took stock of the things we had left.

In our clothes, besides the matches, we had found Ned's pocket-book which contained our railroad fare from Valley Junction to the city, together with an extra fifty cents. But money couldn't help us now, as Hal wisely remarked; nor could Ned's diary-book and lead pencil. The only really useful article we took from our pockets was my stag-horn hunting knife, which was indeed a veritable godsend. In the boat we found our other trot-line — the one we hadn't set out—some sixty snoods, and the dip-net. This completed the extent of our possessions; altogether, then, we were reduced to pretty narrow straits.

"Gee," said I despondently, "we haven't got much left."

"Not much left!" Hal exclaimed. "Why, we got lots and lots! We got a trot-line, haven't we? and our boat and dip-net? What more do you want? When John Roodamoot goes fishing he only has a chew of tobacco!"

I didn't say anything, but it seemed to me that even John Rudemuth must have cut a pretty sorry figure under the circumstances. And when I say that, I have put the extremity of our condition in the strongest way I know.

"Oh, look here!" cried Ned, and reached down to the floor of the boat; "here's your meat-hook, Bert. Lord," he derided, "what'd you expect to catch with it, whales or sharks?"

"Might come in handy," said I. "No use throw-

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ing it away. We'd 'a' been glad enough to have that big fellow hanging on it last night; he wouldn't 'a' got off that hook."

"No," said Hal, "'cause he'd never've got on it." And then, after a pause, "Gee!" he sighed, "that was sure hard luck to lose all our fish. I guess a log must 'a' broken the string of the bag. If we only had our fish I wouldn't care if the darn' river'd 'a' washed us clean to the moon."

"Well," said I, "no use crying over spilt fish."

"But they aren't spilt," he urged. "They're all shut up in that bag. That's the worst of it."

"Oh, there's lots more where those came from," comforted Ned cheerfully. "Say," he added, on a more serious note, "are there any more bullets in that rifle? Hand her here, Bert. I'll see; you go on and row."

Taking the gun, he carefully ejected five cartridges.

"Gee," said I, "only five bullets left, and to think we had two hundred of them!"

Ned looked at them in the palm of his hand.

"We can't waste a single one of 'em," he warned. "We got to make every one count. We'll have to trim a wooden ramrod too to clean her with. Soon as my shirt's dry I'm going to wipe her good. She's full of water."

"Well," I suggested, "let's land somewhere along here. We've got to dry everything and clean out the boat."

"We can't land here," piped up Hal from the prow. "It's all flooded on both sides. We'll have to wait till we get to those hills down yonder."

CHAPTER VIII

Ned Shoots One of Our Five Bullets

IT was as Hal had said. The country on either hand was flat bottom-land, covered far back with water. Further to the south — about three miles, perhaps — extended a range of thickly wooded hills against which the river broke, apparently at right angles, and turned eastward; at least, so I judged.

We had now left Whalen's Bluff over a mile behind us and, following the middle of the stream, were beginning to veer a little to the left. On that side of the river the shore, though flat, was heavily wooded, with the overflow gleaming between the trees.

The day was growing towards noon, and the sun blazed down pitilessly out of a cloudless sky. Of course we had long ago put on our clothes; and by this time they were almost dry.

The river being so high and our boat going with the current, there was no danger either from snags or drifting wood. It was easy rowing too; all I did was to keep her nose downstream and take a leisurely stroke now and then; the current did the rest.

The river was everywhere. Sometimes as we passed a particularly low-lying stretch of country we seemed to be in the middle of some vast lake; except for the current you wouldn't know it was a river at all. Sometimes, again, when there were woods on both

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sides of us we could see the water shining far down the green alleys. And once in a while we would hear a tree crash down, and the sound of it was a dull roar.

The hills were looming larger now, and presently, as we rounded the next curve, we came in sight of what looked like a great dam. Over against us a hill rose sheer from the edge of the water, and in front of it lay, seemingly, a broad lake. Only the line of floating brush and foam, which marked the current, would have told you that it was in reality a swollen stream. As we approached nearer we heard the loud murmur of the river as it turned abruptly and swept along the base of the hills. The trend of it was eastward, as I had surmised. For about two miles, perhaps, you could follow the gleaming surface of the water; and then it deflected northward, being swung in that direction by the curve of the hills.

These observations I had ample time to make as we crossed the river to the foot of the hill: it was upon this hill we had decided to camp.

We landed at a rather steep place and securely moored our boat. To our left was a shoulder of rock, about six feet high, with some scrub-oak growing in its crevices and an ash sapling. By the look of it I could tell that it must have stood much higher from the water when the river was normal.

We unloaded our goods (not much, to be sure) and then began to reconnoitre for a suitable place to pitch camp. As luck would have it, we had not climbed sixty feet up the face of the hill when we

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came upon as likely a spot as you could wish. It was a little limestone grotto, deep enough to shield the three of us and high enough to allow of our standing upright, at least at the mouth. Out in front projected a platform of rock upon which we might build our fire and move about. Altogether, it was an ideal shelter, as snug and comfortable and clean, too, as ever fell to the lot of three dog-weary and destitute boys.

It was the work of only a few minutes to transfer our meager belongings to our new-found camp.

“But the blankets,” Ned reminded us; “we’ve got to dry those blankets.”

Though pretty well tuckered out — what with our morning’s experience and our empty stomachs — we each took his blanket and set out higher up the hill to find a sunny spot among the thick trees. Luck favored us again, for we shortly discovered several great boulders lying in a natural clearing. As we drew near, a number of shiny bottle-green lizards that were basking in the sun darted helter-skelter to their nests in the chinks and seams. We laid out our blankets on the boulders, which were hot enough to fry eggs, and returned to our grotto.

“And now,” said Ned, seating himself on the floor of stone, with his back against the side of the cavern, “we’ll have to call a council of war. What are we going to eat?”

“Gee whiz!” exclaimed Hal, “that’s right! We haven’t got a thing to eat!”

“I hope that’s not the first time you’ve thought

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of it," said I. "I been thinking of it all morning. I could eat shoe leather right this moment."

"Well," said Ned, "there's nothing ripe I know of: blackberries, raspberries, paw-paws, may-apples, wild grapes — they're all green." One would think, by the way he spoke, that all these fruits grew in his private garden on top of the hill.

"And there's no use fishing either," gloomed Hal. "We won't get a bite till the river begins to fall. Besides, we haven't got any bait."

"Well, we've got a gun and five bullets," I suggested. "Can't we shoot a squirrel or something? I'll eat him raw."

Hal shook his head.

"I'm against using up those bullets," said he. "You can't tell what'll happen. We oughtn't to use the gun till we've tried every other way."

"But Lord, Hal," I objected, "there isn't any other way. What do you think, Ned?" I added, without turning my head.

There was no response. I looked around.

Ned was sound asleep in the shade of the grotto, his head pillow'd on his arm. Though mortal hungry, I too felt sleepy. The day was extremely warm, and the cool interior of the recess invited to slumber.

"That's not a bad idea, Hal," said I. "Suppose we take a nap too; we'll be able to watch better to-night. Then, after our sleep, we'll forage the hill. And if it comes to the worst we'll use the rifle."

"Go ahead and turn in," said he. "I don't feel sleepy right now."

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I stretched out on the cool stone floor of our little cavern and gazed drowsily forth through the opening upon the hot afternoon. Just before the mouth of the grotto a silver tangle of gossamer was floating in the air. I watched it for a while as it waved to and fro, and the very watching of it made my eyes heavier. Beyond the silken filaments I could see the green leaves of a maple-tree checkered by broken shafts of sunlight. And once, as I closed my eyes and opened them again, a cardinal flashed through the boughs and disappeared. And then, just before I fell asleep for good, I saw Hal take a piece of paper from his pocket and spread it out in the sunshine upon the platform.

When I opened my eyes again the platform was all in shadow, and the sunlight was no longer among the maple leaves. Hal was lying flat on his chest, his heels in the air, poring over the same bit of paper.

“What you got there?” I asked.

He hastily folded the sheet and put it in his pocket.

“Oh, nothing,” he answered. “Come, it’s near six o’clock, I think. We’d better be finding something to eat.”

I rose to my feet, and, with the movement, my head went round a little so that I must support myself against the wall of the grotto. I was rather frightened; it was the first time in my life that I had been dizzy from hunger.

“What’s the matter?” asked Hal, looking up.

“Hunger,” said I. “It went to my head. I’m all right now.”

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We roused Ned. When he stood up he reeled a little too, just as I had done.

"Tighten your belts a notch, fellows," said he. "Where's the gun? We can't starve. We've got to shoot something before nightfall."

The three of us were standing out on the platform. Below us through the trees the river was glowing far and wide in the evening light. The sun stood away over on our left; we judged it to be after six.

In single file we clambered up the hill. When we reached our blankets we found them quite dried out. They were very warm too; so warm in fact that the lizards had crept out again to lie upon them. You should have seen the wee beasties scurry off at our approach. We folded the blankets then and, all eyes on the lookout for game, resumed our march up the hill.

We gained the summit without so much as starting a sapsucker. There didn't seem to be a single bird in the vicinity, let alone a squirrel or a rabbit. And all about us were trees too: oak and maple and ash and hickory and three or four tall-spired pines. Among the boles sumac and hazel bushes grew thick and high, screening our view of the country beyond.

In silence we started along the level crest of the hill, walking as softly as we could on the carpet of twigs and dead leaves. We had not gone far when we came out into a bit of a clearing and were enabled to take a sweeping view of the whole land to the south. On the extreme horizon were hills, a blue line of them from east to west. The intervening country

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was broken up by a series of lesser hills and heavily wooded valleys. There was not a trace of a house or a field: only a vast wilderness as far as the eye could reach.

I shifted my gaze from the prospect and looked down the hillside. There, to my surprise, not thirty yards away, stood a dog, his right forefoot raised and his head cocked our way. Back and sides of a reddish brown that shaded off into a light gray near the belly, a long bushy tail with a white tip — altogether, he was a quite handsome dog. A sort of collie, I thought.

“Look, Ned,” I said. “There’s a dog!”

But as I uttered these words the animal whisked behind a sumac and disappeared.

“Dog!” cried Ned. “Do you know what that was? It was a red fox! I told you this place was wild!”

“He was tame enough at any rate,” said I.

“We were so still,” Ned explained; “that was the reason. You noticed how he jumped when you spoke. Golly! if I’d only got a shot at him!”

“Sh-h-h!” warned Hal, and pointed up at a maple to our left. “There’s a big fat yellow-hammer. I can see him from here.”

But just then something slid through the air, casting a shadow along the wall of greenery in front of us. We turned in time to see a quail sail silently down the hillside and alight on the branch of a tree in plain view.

“That’s better game,” whispered Ned excitedly.

“He’s too far away, Ned,” Hal objected. “Fifty

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yards if he's an inch. Better take the yellow-hammer."

"What! an old yellow-hammer when we've got a chance for a quail!"

"But we haven't any bullets to waste," Hal persisted. "If you miss—"

The quail flew off without a sound.

"There you are!" cried Ned angrily. "He's gone! Well, where's your darned old yellow-hammer?"

"There he is," said I, who had kept my eye on him. "He's hopped up a couple of feet. Here, you can see him right through this opening; against that limb. There, he's hopped again. . . . All right, there's a peach of a shot."

Ned raised the rifle, cuddled the butt into his shoulder, took careful aim, and fired.

There was a rustling noise up among the leaves; and directly after the yellow-hammer plunged out of the tree and flew away across the valley.

CHAPTER IX

A Nocturnal Visitor

SAID I: "There goes our supper."

Said Hal: "Four bullets left."

Ned, disgruntled, ejected the empty shell.

Said he: "She needs cleaning."

Without a word more we began to retrace our steps along the hilltop. Suddenly, ere we had gone thirty paces, I trod on something that felt hard and round even through the sole of my shoe. I stooped and plucked it out of the grass. It was a brownish black sphere with a hard, pitted surface.

"Hello!" said I, holding it up; "isn't this some sort of a nut?"

Hal looked at it.

"Walnuts, by thunder!" he cried, and glanced up over his head. "Yep, this is a walnut-tree all right! There ought to be a lot of 'em here on the ground. Last year's nuts, and all dried up mos' likely; but they're better'n nothing."

Sure enough, we found plenty around under the leaves and grass; and filled our three hats with them and crammed our pockets. With spirits considerably perked we descended the hill to our camp.

"Now," said Ned, "I'll whittle a ramrod if you fellows crack the nuts. We've got to clean this rifle; we can't afford to have her miss again."

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I thought, maybe it wasn't altogether the fault of the rifle, but I didn't say anything; and Hal and I fell to cracking nuts. About half of them were dried up completely; a fourth were mouldy and inedible; but the remainder would do us in the pinch. It was certainly the skimpiest supper I ever ate, and when it was over I could have sat down successively and with equal appetite to three civilized suppers. And even then, I suppose, I should have still been hungry.

However, the nuts were something. We smacked our lips and wiped our mouths and said the supper was pretty good after all, and that we felt a great deal better. It was an heroic piece of make-believe (my part of it was, I am sure, at all events); and I know that not one of us would have admitted for an instant that he wasn't very much refreshed by our slender repast.

Well, when supper was over, and the shells—not dishes—cleared away, we fetched in a deal of wood from the hillside and stacked it on one end of the platform. Then we spread our blankets on the clean dry rock within the grotto and told ourselves that this would make a better sleeping-place than a tent; which, to be sure, was the truth.

We sat and talked for a while, and presently the sun, which had been hanging like a great golden bubble over the western hills, dropped below the horizon: and at his going a sudden change came over the face of things. A wind sprang up and murmured lonesomely through the trees; they were shuddering, it seemed, at the approach of night. Below us on the

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river the shadows deepened visibly, and the woods on the opposite shore merged into a dark indistinguishable mass. The upper air still glowed with a rosy light; but, even as we watched, it began perceptibly to wane. And then, of a sudden, a chill came over us sitting there in the gathering twilight.

Ned jumped up.

“A fire, fellows,” said he briskly. And a few minutes later we had a merry blaze a-going on the platform of the grotto. The cheerful firelight, dancing on the rock walls of the cavern, made our snug little den look all the more home-like and inviting. We gathered about the crackling flames and discussed how we should pass the night. We came to the conclusion that it would be safer to keep a watch, and accordingly divided up the time as we had done the night before. Only now I was first, Hal second, and Ned third. As we were not fishing we decided to turn in pretty early.

“But first,” said Ned, pulling out his diary-book, “I want to jot down the day’s adventures. Hand me the lantern, Hal.”

Pushing up the globe, he lit a twig at the fire and held it to the wick. There was a sharp sputtering, but no flame. He shook the lantern impatiently.

“What’s the matter with this oil?” he wondered.

“I know,” said Hal, right ready. “It’s full of water. You may as well throw the lantern away for all the good it’s going to do us now.”

Ned set it aside.

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"Oh, well," said he, and stretched out towards the firelight with his book before him on the rock.

He scribbled away for fifteen minutes or so, while Hal and I sat silent, looking down the darkening hill-side. At length he left off his writing, shut his notebook, and said he was going to bed. Hal followed suit, leaving me all alone on the platform. I arose and got the rifle, and then sat down with my back to the face of the grotto.

It was become quite dark now, although the million stars glowing in the heavens shed a sort of faint lustre upon the night. Peering out through the trees at the broad expanse of bottom in front of me, I was enabled by the starshine to distinguish the sprawling course of the river. And darker against the dark background of the lowlands bulked frequent bosks or thickets. But round about me on the hillside was pitchy gloom. Outside the circle of firelight I could see nothing; and the edge of the platform beyond the leaping flames might have been the edge of the bottomless pit or the end of the world.

But suddenly, as I sat there with my eyes on the glowing coals, a kind of brightness fell about me that was not the brightness of the fire; and looking up, I saw something big and silvery hanging low behind the eastern hills, and knew that the moon had risen. I watched it as it rose, and presently it had left the earth and was floating in the sky; though it stood like a balloon that might have been hauled back again.

With this new radiance the whole country before me was covered. The river gleamed like a broad belt

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of jet, with glints of silver; and here and there were uneven edges that marked the flooded fields. The tops of the great cottonwoods, swaying in the night air, sparkled brightly, and even on the low-lying brakes of tangled brush rested the pale glimmer of moon-beams.

My watch wore on. Now and again I would lay another stick or two on the fire and then resume my seat against the rock. I wasn't afraid of repeating my performance of the night before, as now I was not in the least sleepy, owing to my nap in the afternoon. I lengthened my watch a little, I suppose, though of course I wasn't certain of it, there being no timepiece at hand. At last, however, I knocked up Hal and crawled back into the grotto and folded my blanket about me. It was eleven o'clock or somewhat later, I thought.

From the first my sleep was disturbed by dreams. Weird, chimerical images flitted across my mind, which I don't recall now but which, at all events, awoke me twice as I pitched and tossed on my stone bed. At last there came a dream more hideous than any that had gone before. I recollect it now, vividly. I seemed to myself to be lying just where I was, within the grotto, but a strange and horrible gloom was enveloping me. A blackness worse than night was closing in, and as I strained my eyes in the intense dark I saw to my horror that the curved roof above me was descending slowly. There was no escape. The mouth of the grotto was obstructed by this impenetrable wall of gloom, and besides, when I tried to

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move, I found that I was unable to stir hand or foot. Lower and lower sank the roof. I might have reached it now with my hand. I strove to cry aloud, to shriek my terror into the ears of night; but my tongue clave to my palate. And now the rock was touching my forehead; cold and clammy and sickening was the feel of it. Two seconds more, and my skull must split and crush. And at the thought I woke and screamed aloud.

But I did not scream alone. In the same second almost there came, like an echo, an answering scream, and I sat up and looked forth upon the platform. The sight that met my eyes struck the breath quite out of me.

In the checkered moonlight (for the fire was only a bed of waning coals) I saw Hal flattened with fright against the corner of the cavern wall, his two eyes wide with sudden fear. On the platform near the fire lay the rifle, and beyond crouched a wild beast, dark and menacing, that looked as big as a tiger. Its head was down between its paws, and its eyes burned like two points of fire. Its back was arched a little, and in the moonlight I could see its long tail lashing about. In the split second in which my eyes took in this scene my ears heard a sharp grating sound, and I knew that the brute was clawing the rock for his spring. In the remaining portion of that same second I had whipped out my hunting knife and risen to my knees. The next instant the beast and I sprang together.

I met him in full career. His forefeet, striking my

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two shoulders, flung me back against Hal; but in the act I had plunged my knife into his throat. For a moment his savage jowls hung before my face, and then with a roar of pain he fell at my feet. But I am not sure whether he wouldn't have done for us yet, had he not fallen on the edge of the platform and dropped to the ground below.

We listened, breathless. Was he dead, or only wounded and crouching for another spring? We could not tell, for we heard no sound in the unearthly silence save the mad beating of our hearts.

“What’s all the rumpus?” asked a sleepy voice behind us.

Startled, I whisked about. Ned was standing at the entrance of the grotto, with his fists in his eyes.

“We just had a go with a catamount,” said I.

“Or a tiger,” said Hal. “He’s right down there.”

Ned was wide awake now, I can tell you.

“A catamount! Right down there! Oh, come, you’re dreaming.”

At that moment, on the hillside above us, a loud cry, half roar and half moan, went quavering on the night; and the sound of it was hideous.

“There he is,” said Hal, a tremble in his voice.

“That’s some sort of an animal all right,” Ned admitted. “But are you fellows trying to string me?”

“Look here,” said I, “If you don’t believe *me*,” and I held out my knife. The blade was still dripping, and across the back of my hand you could see a great spurt of blood. “If you don’t believe that,”

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I added, "look here." And I pointed to my breast. On both sides of my coat, from shoulders to waist, the cloth was hanging in shreds. "His claws did that," said I.

Hal sprang forward.

"Bert, you're hurt!"

"No," said I, "my coat protected me. He didn't get my flesh — at least not much." And this indeed I found to be the case. There were only a few slight scratches on my breast. (I may add here, in parenthesis, that I still retain in my possession that very coat and knife as souvenirs of my hand-to-hand encounter with a catamount.)

"Gee whiz," said Ned wistfully, "to think what I missed! Here, we'll get the fire a-going, and you tell me all about it."

There was no more sleep for us that night, as you may suppose. Again and again I must recount the incident for Ned's benefit, adding a detail or two each time, some forgotten and some invented; and always supplemented in my narrative by remarks from Hal.

Hal, by his account, had fallen asleep just as I had done the night before. He must have been sleeping a goodish time, for the fire had almost burned itself out. Then, on a sudden, he heard a terrible shriek (my shriek when I woke from the dream) and started up wide awake. Across the low-glowing coals he saw a huge animal crouching in the moonlight. Forgetting the rifle altogether, he sprang back against

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the rock and screamed through sheer terror. Then I had stepped upon the scene.

Dawn was breaking ere we had satisfied ourselves upon all points of this remarkable and thrilling occurrence. And even then we continued to talk for some time. At length, just as the treetops were turning rosy with the first rays of the sun, Ned got to his feet and stood gazing glumly down into the pale ashes of the fire.

“Shucks,” he said, “it’s always my luck to miss the fun.”

CHAPTER X

Ned Shoots One of Our Four Bullets

WELL, of course, we hunted the hill for the catamount. But, save for some smears of blood on the side of the platform where he had fallen, we discovered no trace of him thereafter. I, for one, was willing enough to let him go; I didn't care to behold again the sight of those bared fangs and cruel jaws.

It was well along in the morning when we came to a halt on top of the hill in the spot where Ned (or the gun) had missed the yellow-hammer the day before. Hal, who was behind us, uttered a sudden cry, and pointed down the hill towards the river.

“Look, fellows, how the river's fallen over night. We ought to be able to put in our line this afternoon.”

We looked, and sure enough, what yesterday had been a wide flood was now so shrunk that you could easily distinguish the normal course of the river. Detached bodies of water, like little lakes, lay gleaming here and there in the lower parts of the land. And along the track of the overflow you could see the weeds and even the smaller trees bent flat in the shining brown mud. At varying points great piles of brush-wood towered up, like fantastic monuments built by the genii of the flood.

And yet, though the river was fallen considerably,

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it was by no manner of means back at its customary height. There was still no sign of a gravel-bar anywhere, and I made sure there must be one in the neighborhood of the hill. Besides, you could see the tops of sedge weeds pretty far out in the stream; and these, I knew, grew only near the shore.

“She’s not all the way down yet,” said Hal. “By to-night —”

But he didn’t finish the sentence. With a sort of groan he reeled forward a little and, before I could catch him, fell heavily upon the grass.

Ned and I dropped to his side and tore open the collar of his flannel shirt. His face had gone as white as a fish’s belly, and he seemed scarcely to breathe.

“Stay here, Ned,” I said; “I’ll go down to the river and fetch some water.” (I didn’t know what I was going to fetch it in; my hat, I suppose.)

But as I spoke, Hal’s eyelids fluttered, and then gradually lifted. The color came slowly back to his face, and he sat up and looked around wonderingly.

“What — what’s the matter?” he asked.

“You’ve just fainted, Hal,” said Ned quite tenderly.

“Fainted! Me? Jiminy Chrismus! Why?”

“You’re empty, that’s why,” I answered, and sat down. I was dead tired and all but fainting myself. “I’m empty too; so’s Ned. We’ve been so excited over this catamount that we’ve forgotten all about being hungry. But just think, we haven’t had a

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thing to eat since night before last! — except those blamed nuts, and they gave me the nightmare.”

A kind of smile flickered on Hal’s lips.

“A lucky nightmare, though,” he said. And then, “Gee, but I’m getting to be a regular baby,” he added shamefacedly; “’fraid of a catamount with a gun right in my hands, and then fainting and everything.”

Ned patted him on the shoulder.

“Baby! I’d like to see the fellow that ’ud try to call you a baby! You’re as game as fish-hooks, Hal. People can’t help fainting any more’n they can help breathing. It just happens.”

“And then that catamount,” I put in, “he took you by surprise. You didn’t have time to think.”

Hal got unsteadily to his feet.

“Gee, I feel funny. Everything’s kinda jumpy. Here, let me lean against this tree. . . . All right, I feel pretty good now. You fellows try and shoot something, and I’ll go back to camp.”

We were going to assist him down the hill, and even started back with him along the summit; but he would have none of our help, saying he wasn’t so big a baby as all that. I was for bearing him company anyway, but Ned plucked me by the sleeve and gave me a meaning look; so I desisted. And together we watched him trudge stoutly off through the bushes, whistling a tune just to show how strong he really was.

“Now let’s bag something,” said Ned with a lively air.

“It’s high time we did,” said I dolefully.

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And indeed it was, as you may suppose. I felt like an animated dishrag, I was that hungry. And I made quite sure that Ned, for all his brisk manner, wasn't feeling any better. The truth was, though we scarcely realized it then, the three of us were but a very little way from actual starvation. To be sure, we had the nuts, but those moldy, shrivelled things wouldn't have kept a chipmunk alive. Then, there was the river; we might still fish. But the obstacle, of course, in that direction was lack of bait: we didn't have the ghost of a worm or anything else. And as I told Ned, fish don't swallow bare hooks just for the fun of it.

Altogether, then, we were in a sorry plight. If we found nothing to shoot, or if we missed what we shot at, there was nothing for it but to fall back on the walnuts, and probably, I grimly owned, be poisoned. This prospect was gloomy, certainly, but prospects far gloomier loomed before my mind, and I was just on the point of stating them to Ned (who was a few yards ahead of me) when he halted abruptly and, without turning his head, held out his hand behind him, signaling silence. I stopped in my tracks, wondering.

We were down in the valley now, on the opposite side of the hill to the river. For some minutes we had been walking through a grove of lofty elm-trees interspersed rather thickly with low horsechestnuts and paw-paws and dogwoods; and our way had been blocked more than once by a thorny tangle of berry bushes. High above, the long branches were lashing

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and grinding in a stiff breeze that blew from the west, and all around us on the ground the dead leaves were eddying about; and now and again, in a clearer space, would come whipping up into our eyes.

Ned beckoned me to come nearer.

“Listen to that,” he whispered. “It’s in front of us. You can hear it on the wind. What do you think it is?”

I gave a close ear but heard not a sound, save the steady roaring of the summer gale through the myriad leaves of the grove.

“I don’t hear anything,” I answered at length.

“Sh-h! there it is again.”

Sure enough, I could detect it now: a quick succession of peculiar sounds, somewhat like drops of water falling into a bucket, only much louder. Indeed, the sounds were so loud that I marveled I had not heard them before.

“Easy now,” Ned whispered. “Maybe we’ll see something beyond that patch of blackberry bushes.”

Some few rods ahead of us, in an open area among the trees—a kind of glade it was—stood a dense covert of bushes and elm saplings. Crouching down, we went forward very softly. Once behind the bushes we endeavored to peer through to the other side, but our vision was obstructed by the thick foliage. We might have stood up and looked over, perhaps; but Ned, by a motion of his hand, checked that; and we crept along to the end of the brake. There Ned put out his head ever so cautiously, while I knelt behind him all a-tremble with excitement.

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“See anything?” I asked, in a voice that was more than a whisper. For my pains I received a sharp poke from his elbow. I kept silent.

Then he craned his neck a few inches further, and just as I was going to look too, over his shoulder, back he jerks like a spring let loose.

“What is it?” I asked, this time in a real whisper.

“Gee, take a look,” he answered in the same voice, his eyes all aglow; “but be careful!”

Not knowing what I should see, whether catamounts or wild Indians, I certainly was careful. At first I saw nothing but a long vista of level, leaf-strewn ground with patches of green grass here and there, and over all the great arching trees. Then I peeped out a little further—two inches, perhaps—and there not twenty-five yards away, just beyond the gnarled base of an immense elm, three big birds were stepping slowly about and pecking under the leaves. They were very handsome birds, one in particular that looked to be the male. His tail was spread fan-wise, just like a turkey’s; and when the sunlight struck it, it had a sheen like burnished bronze. His head and the upper part of his neck were devoid of feathers, the comb-like skin being of a dull crimson. A peculiar growth of the same color stood out from the top of his head, and from his breast hung a bunch of black hairy bristles, like a misplaced beard. These features together with his strutting made him look to me more and more like a turkey-cock.

And then, as I was still peering out at them, the

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cock's neck swelled oddly ; he opened his beak a little ; and again we heard the peculiar gurgling sounds.

"Don't you recognize it now ?" Ned whispered in my ear.

I drew back.

"He looks like a turkey-cock to me," I said.

"Just what he is ! They're wild ! That noise was the old gobbler ! Lord-ee, if I can only hit him now !"

He lay on his side and softly thrust the rifle through the bushes. Working the barrel very gently, he gradually made an opening large enough to admit of his sighting the game. Then, as I crouched there watching, I saw him grip the gun more firmly, settle his cheek against the stock, and take aim.

And what a mortal time he was in aiming ! It seemed five minutes to me, and all the while my heart was thumping so loudly I made sure the turkeys must hear it. Thoughts, mostly disjointed, shot like lightning through my mind. What a great thing, to be bagging a wild turkey ! And how good he would be, broiled to a crisp brown with the tender white meat beneath ! And there would be plenty of it too ; all we wanted. We would come down the hillside holding aloft our turkey-gobbler ; and how Hal's eyes would widen with wonder and delight ! Then my attention leaped back to Ned still lying there with his eyes screwed on the gun-sights. And as I looked at him, all of a sudden there flashed the thought that he might miss the turkey as he had missed the yellow-hammer ; and I began with all my heart and soul to say the Hail Mary. When I had got as far as "now

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and at the hour," crack! went the rifle, and a thundering whirr of wings filled the air.

"I've got him!" cried Ned, "I've got him!"

I sprang to my feet half wild with joy and excitement, and dashed around the corner of the thicket. There, flopping about among the leaves, his great wings beating the ground helplessly, the big turkey-cock was making his last struggle. I grabbed him by the neck and held him.

"She shot true that time, Ned," I cried gleefully as he ran up.

"Couldn't miss," he replied. "It was like shooting at a barn door." He stooped and lifted the turkey. "Gee, he's big and fat. Weighs twenty pounds if he weighs an ounce. Golly, just wait till Hal sees him!"

With high hearts and bounding steps we hastened back to the foot of the hill and almost flew up to the top. Then, shouting and whooping for joy, we went crashing down the other side, breaking anyhow through the bushes and sending the loose rocks leaping among the trees.

I was the first to spy Hal standing by the grotto and looking up the hillside in a great wonder.

"We've killed a turkey, Hal!" I roared out, and held him aloft.

Then, with renewed shouting, we tore on down the hill. Together we reached the platform; and throwing the big bird down upon the rock, I turned and looked triumphantly at Hal. He seemed surprised and happy, but there was more of happiness in his face than of surprise, I thought.

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“That’s great!” he said. “Gee! a real wild turkey! But I’ve found something better’n a wild turkey.”

I could only stare at him, stupid.

“What is it?” asked Ned, half defiantly.

“I’ve found that treasure!”

CHAPTER XI

Hal's Discovery

NED sat down suddenly on the platform and took off his hat.

"That treasure!" he repeated, wondering: and there was a sort of peevishness, too, in his tone. "What treasure's that?"

Hal didn't answer immediately; only looked at us with a quizzical and amused expression. (For my own part, I confess, I began to have an awful suspicion that hunger was driving him out of his head.)

At length, "Don't you remember Jerry Bottom?" he said slowly, "and his friend Buck Webb, and Tom Crawford that they were going to kill?"

Ned sprang to his feet, his face lighting with excitement and a hundred questions.

"What!" he cried. "Were they hunting for a treasure after all? Did you meet 'em? Did you find the treasure? Where is it?"

"Well, no," said Hal with a sort of twinkle in his eye. "I haven't found the treasure yet. But I've found Tom Crawford. They've murdered him all right enough," he added parenthetically. Then (and now I made sure poor Hal was crazy), "He told me where the treasure is hidden," he concluded.

"What the dickens is all this!" cried Ned, at his wits' end.

Hal reached down and took the turkey by the leg.

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"Not another word," he said emphatically, "till I get something to eat. Gee, he's a big fellow! Dibs on the tail feathers! Aren't they beauts!"

"But look here, Hal," Ned began.

"Hal's right, Ned," said I. (My doubts as to his sanity had vanished now.) "Let's cook our turkey and eat. Let the treasure go for a while. We got treasure enough right here. Hal, you pick him, and I'll start the fire. Ned, here's my knife. Cut some nice green spits—a lot of 'em. We'll have to cook the whole of him now; we can't keep him except he's cooked."

I got a roaring blaze a-going presently, and when I had packed in more wood from the hillside I crossed over to the brink of the platform to help Hal pluck the turkey. He had the tail feathers already laid apart, and he told me he was going to add them to his collection.

Well, after we had plucked our turkey clean and singed him in the flames, I took my knife, slit him open and removed his inwards. As we couldn't eat these, I was just about to heave them down the hill when a sudden idea struck me, and I put them carefully aside; I would remove them later on to a cooler place.

My, but he was a plump turkey! as plump as a chestnut, with big bulges of yellow fat along his breast and under his back. Sharpening my knife on the rock of the grotto, I set about carving him in portions which we might with least difficulty broil on the spits.

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I shall never forget the delicious fragrance that assailed our nostrils as the three of us sat around the fire, each holding his spit and watching his bit of turkey meat turn slowly from a livid raw color into a glistening juicy brown. The fat melted and fell sputtering into the coals but not without adding its share of flavor to the toasting delicacy.

“Gee, it smells good!” said Hal. “My mouth’s watering already.... I think mine’s done,” he added suddenly, and held his piece before my eyes.

“Better cook her a little more,” I advised; and half unwillingly he thrust it back over the flames.

At length, however, our first portions were done to a turn. You should have seen us blowing and juggling them as we slipped them still sizzling from the spits. And then when we buried our teeth in the smoking white meat, you should only have seen the smile on our faces. Oh, but that old bird was good! I don’t want to taste anything better!

Well, we cooked and ate three pieces, one straight after the other; and Ned was for eating the whole turkey then and there. But Hal said we had best cook the rest and save it for supper, as we should be sorry then if we were to gobble it all up now. This was the wiser counsel every way; so, after broiling the drumsticks and the back and the wings and what was left of the breastbone, we wrapped them up in Ned’s undershirt, which was pretty clean (all things considered), and laid them away in the grotto.

It was a little after the noon hour now, and the platform was white with sunshine. Still, the day was

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not hot; a strong steady breeze from the west blew along the hillside, swaying the treetops with a kind of dull roaring sound fit to lull a body to sleep.

Ned stretched out on the cool rock floor of the grotto, with his hands clasped behind his head.

"Gee," said he, "I feel like the Prince o' Wales. I wish we could bag a turkey every day."

"The best of it is," said Hal, sitting down, "we got some left for supper. . . . Well," he added, looking my way, "you fellows ready for the treasure?"

Ned sprang like a jumping-jack to a sitting posture.

"Great Caesar's ghost!" he cried. "I forgot all about the treasure. Tell us everything, Hal, straight out."

As for me, I was just as excited and interested as Ned, though, I own, I prefer my excitement and my interest to come on the top of a full stomach.

"Well, in the first place," said Hal, "you remember the man we caught on the trot-line up at Whalen's? Well, that was Tom Crawford, all right."

"That's what I thought all along," said I. "Didn't I say when we fished him out, 'Hal, I'll bet this is Tom Crawford?' But how do you know for certain he's Tom Crawford?"

Hal nodded his head.

"I know all right. Ned, you remember that letter you found in his pocket and then threw away?"

"Yes, but geewhilikens, that didn't say anything at all." Ned's tone was rather crestfallen, I thought.

"Well, I picked that letter up and kept it. It tells us everything, as plain as day." Hal arose, went

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over to where his coat was lying on the blankets and came back with the identical piece of paper I had seen him poring over the day before.

“Here it is,” said he, with a peculiar look. “Read it.”

Ned took the letter and scanned it eagerly, I kneeling at his side and reading it with him. The writing was still pretty clear, although in spots the water had well-nigh obliterated some of the characters.

“Read it out loud,” Hal suggested; “then you’ll see.” I glanced across at him; a furtive smile was lurking in his eyes. He had some joke up his sleeve, I suspected, and it was aimed at us.

Ned shook his head; he was altogether at sea.

“Darned if I can find anything in it,” he puzzled. “Well, here goes.” And he read again the following letter.

Dear Pal:

Bad news and good. After I left you Sunday on Hunter’s road who should I meet driving along near the sandstone hill but the old man who owns the horse with the triple-star brand. I gave him your offer again but he blazed up fierce, slashed out with his whip at a scrub oak and said that he wouldn’t swap his little beauty for fifteen mares like yours.

Later, I discovered he lives to the north of here — pretty far out in the hill country — some ten or eleven miles. I guess his farm must be just west of the White Fork Pike.

Don’t leave till I come down.

Yours truly,

W. J. F.

HAL'S DISCOVERY

Ned looked up blankly.

"I can't make anything of it," he confessed. "Can you, Bert?" I shook my head.

Hal was laughing now, openly.

"Don't you remember, Bert," he explained, "you said you heard Jerry Bottom say something about a cipher, and you didn't know what a cipher was, and asked Ned, and Ned said it was a kind of secret writing? Well, I—"

At Hal's first mention of a cipher Ned's nose was back in the letter as though he were bent on smelling out the secret. He raised a hand to check Hal.

"Don't tell us, Hal, don't tell us!" he cried. "See if we can figure it out ourselves. Let's see Let's see."

We puzzled over the faded writing for some minutes, but I confess I couldn't make head or tail of it. It was just a plain letter, so far as I could see.

"Oh, I give it up," said Ned at last, impatient to hear the sequel. "What is it, Hal?"

Hal was standing up now, quite bursting with his revelation.

"Just you read every eleventh word," said he dramatically, "and you've got Jerry Bottom's secret and the location of the buried treasure!"

Ned counted off the words, his voice shaking with excitement.

"Hunter's . . . hill . . . triple . . . blazed . . . oak . . . fifteen . . . north . . . ten . . . west . . . down. Gee-min-ently, Hal, but that's slick!" he exclaimed

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in admiration, looking up. "How did you figure it out?"

"Like falling off a log," replied Hal easily. "Besides gibberish, our club at school's got a cipher too, only we don't call it a cipher. Every fi'th word makes sense in our writing; all the other words are just a jumble—not like this letter. Well, I tried our scheme, but it wouldn't work. Then I went back and tried every second, third, fourth word and so on till I got to the eleventh. And that was the key."

"But where's Hunter's Hill?" said I suddenly. Hal nodded his head emphatically.

"That's what we've got to find out. And once we know where Hunter's Hill is, we've got to locate the oak with the triple blaze. It'll be easy enough after that; we can get our bearings from the sun, and the numbers mean either feet or yards. We'll try both."

CHAPTER XII

The Dead Come to Life?

WELL, as you may suppose, we were wrought up to the very pitch of excitement by the hidden meaning of the letter which Hal had deciphered. For the rest of the afternoon we sat in the grotto, discussing our prospects of lifting the treasure and debating as to the course of action we should adopt. Ned was all for striking camp incontinently and pursuing our journey down the river till we discovered Hunter's Hill. The odds were, he argued, that the hill lay somewhere along the river, else Jerry Bottom and his companion would not be trying to reach it by boat. Add to this, he said, that there were only two hills upstream that could possibly be the one where the treasure was buried. (This was quite true, as I remembered we had passed only two hills after we had overheard the memorable conversation on the ledge. Of course there was Whalen's, but that was one hill we might safely eliminate. Between Whalen's and our present location we had traveled through bottom-land, as the reader will recall.)

"Now that's my way of it, fellows," Ned concluded, striking his knee with his fist. "Of course, we're running the chance of one of those two hills up above being Hunter's Hill. But I don't think it is.

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And I'll tell you why: Jerry Bottom and Buck Webb would never have gone clean back to Kimley, even for booze, if they had been so near the treasure. No sir-ee, Hunter's Hill's away down the river, I'll bet, and what we've got to do is to beat 'em there, dig up the gold and make tracks."

"Gold!" I exclaimed. "How do you know it's gold?"

Ned leaned back against the cavern wall.

"Oh, well," says he, "it's treasure, isn't it? Same thing."

"That's all well and good, Ned," Hal struck in, "but how are you going to find Hunter's Hill? There's hunderds of hills along the river; how you going to find out which is Hunter's?"

"Ask," replied Ned, as cool as you please.

"Shucks," said Hal. "Ask! Ask who? I haven't seen a single person since we left Kimley except Jerry Bottom and Buck Webb."

"Well, what plan have you got then?" Ned demanded a little warmly.

Hal twirled his cap a moment in thought. Then he put it on his head again.

"This," says he. "Wait here. This is a good place to camp. Wait here and keep our eyes peeled for Bottom and Webb. Then when they pass by, we'll follow them! And wherever they stop we'll know that's Hunter's Hill. Or if they go away from the river we can follow 'em still. But it won't be like hunting for a needle in a haystack; we'll be sure to find the right hill in the end."

THE DEAD COME TO LIFE?

This scheme approved itself to my judgment, and I told Ned so. Nevertheless, he continued to argue; and it was only after a considerable time that he finally gave in, and very grudgingly at that too. But in the event, as you shall see, it was by adopting his idea that we finally located the whereabouts of Hunter's Hill.

After we had settled our plan of action, we launched out upon the character and amount of the treasure: and here, as you may fancy, our imaginations carried us beyond "the wealth of Ormus and of Ind." To my thinking, the cache would consist of big bars of gold and silver with a plentiful sprinkling of diamonds and red rubies and pearls and other precious stones. Ned held out for gold pieces: no silver, only eagles and double-eagles; yellow boys, he said, that would chink in your pockets and weigh them down too. As to diamonds and suchlike, he didn't take much stock in jewels, he said; though, of course, he would be willing to pick them up if there were any lying about. Hal was the least sanguine of the three of us; by his account we should come off handsome if we unearthed a paltry half dozen bags of nickels and dimes. But I imagine he said this, the sly rogue, in order to be the more delightfully surprised in the event.

And so we went on talking almost in a frenzy of expectation, gilding hope with the fair hues from our treasure-trove.

At length, chancing to look forth from the grotto in the direction of the west, I started to my feet with

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a cry of dismay. The sun stood less than thirty minutes from the horizon.

"Come, you fellows!" I cried. "We've got to hustle if we want to do any fishing to-night. And we've got to catch some fish if we don't want to starve. We can't shoot a wild turkey every day."

"Lord," said Ned, "we haven't even got any bait!"

"You just leave that to me," said Hal. "You and Bert put in the line, and I guarantee by the time you've finished I'll have the bait ready."

That was a go; so Ned and I made our way down the hillside, leaving Hal upon the platform. I had no idea how he was going to get the bait; but get it he would I didn't doubt for a moment.

When we reached the boat, lo and behold! it was hanging half out of the water to the tree around which we had tied the painter. I glanced at the bit of rock we had remarked when we first arrived, and now, wonderful enough, it was quite a formidable-looking bluff. You could easily see the high-water mark between five and six feet from the present surface. The river had fallen that much during the night and day.

"Look," said Ned, and pointed across the water. "There's a part of a gravel-bar."

Sure enough, a strip of mud-washed gravel, some fifteen feet wide, showed at the edge of the flat-lying weeds on the right bank of the river. A drop of another six inches would reveal a wide sweep of bar; of this I made sure.

"Well," said Ned, loosening the painter, "the

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river's not altogether down yet. She'll fall the rest of the way to-night, I guess, and that ought to make swell fishing; if Hal only finds some bait."

I got in, and Ned manned the oars.

"We'd better put her in where the river's narrowst," said I; "right up above here: from those woods over there to the gravel-bar. There's a buried stump sticking up in the shallow water. We can tie her to that instead of taking her clean over to the bank. We've got to hurry too, Ned," I warned. "That sun's not got a quarter of an hour to run."

I buttoned up my coat. Though the cool summer gale that was blowing all day long had fallen dead an hour ago, the air was very chill, chillier even down here on the river than up on the hill. The chirping of innumerable insects had already begun, and now and then an early frog sang out his high tremolo. And once, as I lifted my eyes, I saw two doves flying across from the woods to the hilltop, and their wings glistened like burnished gold in the long evening light.

Well, when we got to the stump on the still flooded gravel-bar I made one end of the trot-line fast; and then, ere we started across, we ran our eyes along the opposite shore to hit upon a likely place to tie the other end. The best spot, to our thinking, was just at the corner where the river turned to the east along the range of hills. Here, right upon the margin of the stream and at the base of a little bank, a handsome silver birch stood up, its green branches hanging out over the river. On both sides of it the shore was

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thick with bushes and young willows whose leaves showed yellow with the mud of the recent flood.

To this point, then, we laid our course, Ned rowing and I paying out the line from the dancing ball at my feet. It was a stiff pull for Ned, as the current here was uncommonly swift, and the long arc of line, lying on the surface, dragged heavily. But we finally reached our goal without mishap; indeed, when Ned ran the boat's nose aground we were several yards above the birch-tree; so we must push off again. As the stern swung round I grasped a limb of the birch, and, looping the line about my arm, drew myself in until I could lay hold of the white trunk. Having gauged our slack so that the contrivance might hug the bottom, I secured the trot-line about the tree, cut off what remained (for I purposed to do a little fishing literally on my own hook) and then for the first time raised my eyes to the bank above me. And as I so looked, my heart gave a sudden knock against my ribs, and the hair on my head began to creep.

There, staring down upon me through a partial screen of muddy bushes, was the face of the man we had buried two nights before!

CHAPTER XIII

I Set Out My Throw-Line

FOR the interval of some breathless seconds I gazed up at it in a sickening dread. It was a horrid sight; even to-day the bare recollection of it almost gives me a qualm.

“What’s the matter with you?” came Ned’s voice querulously from behind me. “What you looking at?”

And then, before I could answer, a thing happened which I hope I may never witness again as long as I live. With a sudden movement the loathsome corpse threw up both hands and lurched forward down the bank straight towards the boat.

I am no coward, as the foregoing incidents in this narrative amply show, but when that grisly apparition descended upon me I confess I had a wild desire to fling myself into the river and swim for dear life. As it was, I recoiled a pace involuntarily; the boat canted over, shipping a quantity of water; and, “What the deuce is wrong?” cried Ned, trimming on his thwart.

At that moment the dead body slid past the white birch-tree, and, with its legs in the water, paused there a moment, for all the world as if it were a living man sitting at the river’s brink.

“What’s wrong!” I answered. “Look!”

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But, even as I spoke the word, the hideous object slipped into the river almost beneath the boat and sank from sight in the yellow water.

I turned and looked at Ned. His jaw was fallen, and his eyes were wide with horror.

“What — what was that?” he asked.

I took my seat again in the stern and grasped the trot-line, though it was little stomach I had for fishing in those waters then.

“That was the man we buried up at Whalen’s,” I answered. “Looks as if he were following us, doesn’t it?” And I could not help shuddering a little at the thought.

Ned still sat upright and motionless, his oars swinging heedlessly in the current.

“But, good Lord! what was he doing there? He didn’t rise from his grave and come down here to sit on the bank and watch us.”

“No,” said I; “the river washed him down and lodged him up there behind the birch. Whatever was holding him must have given way suddenly.”

“Of course,” said Ned, relieved, and laid hold of the oars. Then, “But didn’t he look awful!” he added, and I saw the horror still upon his face.

“Here,” said I, “you take the line and sit in the prow and fasten on the snoods. I don’t know the trick of it.”

We fell silent then for a goodish time while Ned tied on the hooks. Both of us were too shaken by the ghastly sight to talk much about it. We were thinking of it, though (I know I was at any rate), and

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wondering what dire and dreadful significance lay hidden in the fact of our being thus dogged by the dead man. We were in possession of his secret; was he pursuing after us to claim it? or did he wish to warn us against some unseen danger? to bid us cast his letter away and have nothing to do with this unhallowed treasure?

Foolish thoughts these were, I suppose; mere fancies born of my sudden fright. And yet, as I sat there upon the surface of the darkling waters, with the daylight fading around me and the night wind beginning to sough through the trees on either shore, I could not throw off this sense of impending ill nor rid myself of the suspicion that the vision of the dead man had been a warning of it. And, as events will show, this premonition was only too truly verified.

We had not quite reached the middle of the line when, lifting my eyes from the darkening canyon of the river, I saw the treetops away up on the summit of the hill glittering like gold-foil in the last streams of sunlight. And then, as I yet looked, the brightness waned and disappeared, leaving the trees a blotch of blackness against the glowing sky beyond. Before Ned had done looping on the snoods, hill and river and the low-lying woods on the other shore were equally shrouded in the gathering glooms of twilight.

Ned dropped the last hook over the side and came back for the oars.

“We’ve got to hurry now,” said he, “if we want to get the bait on before night sets in for good. We

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haven't got any lantern, you know, and it'll be quite a while before the moon comes up."

"I wonder," said I, "if Hal got any bait. O Hal!" I called, and my voice echoed uncannily from the woods on the opposite shore. I called again, and presently an answering shout sounded from the hill-top. "He's been hunting for it at least," I said.

The prow crunched in against the bank, and we got out and stretched; it is a cramping business to sit in a boat for over an hour. Hal was coming down the hillside now; we could hear the snapping of twigs and the slithering of loose rocks; and every now and again one would come bouncing down and plump into the water beneath us.

"Did you get any bait?" I cried.

"Yeah," he answered. "Good uns. If I don't spill 'em all before I get there."

Presently he reached the bottom, holding his cap, bag-like, in one hand.

"Here they are," he said, and opened his cap. "Look. Aren't they nice fat boys?"

Sure enough, there in his cap was a writhing welter of big angleworms.

"Where'd you get them?" I asked, surprised.

"Oh, just picked 'em up. But we've got to go easy on 'em. One's enough for two hooks. And even at that we'll hardly have enough for two runs."

"Well," said I, "you and Ned bait, and I'll get a lot of wood for the night." (You see, I wished to put in a line of my own without their knowing it.)

"Well, all right," said Ned grudgingly. "But we

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might have tossed up for it. It's no fun baiting."

"Oh, well," said I, knowing he wouldn't accept my offer, "I'll go if you want."

He turned in a pet and threw the painter into the boat.

"Come on, Hal," said he.

"You might tell Hal what we saw," I suggested by way of reconciliation, as I shoved them from the shore.

"Geewhilikens, yes!" exclaimed Ned, in good humor again; and as they rowed away I stood there for a space, listening to Ned's account and marveling at his powers of dramatic narration.

Then I ran up the hill to the log under which I had laid the turkey's entrails wrapped in oak leaves, picked them up, and carried them to the platform. Here I sat down and drew from my pocket the piece of trot-line, which I had cut for myself, and my big hook — my meat-hook, as Ned had derisively called it. On this I impaled, one after another, the turkey's multitudinous viscera and stuffed them up the shank; my nose, I confess, puckering at the operation in spite of me. When the last entrail was stuck on I held up my bait; sumptuous and luring, with thick rolls of intestines, it resembled some sort of strange German sausage.

"There," I said, "if the turtles let you alone you ought to catch a whopper. There isn't a fish under ten pounds that could manage you."

Taking one of the snoods, I cut off the little hook and tied on my German sausage. This and a large

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stone for sinker I secured to my length of trot-line and then started along the hillside down the river. After crossing a ravine, I came up on a very steep incline that terminated at the bottom in a shelf of rock, about five feet high, jutting out over the water. Here on the ledge I knotted one end of my line to a twisted cedar scrub, and stood up ready to heave the tackle forth. But I paused and looked again upstream and across to where Ned and Hal were baiting. Although it was now dusk, by looking sharp they could have seen me easily enough, for I stood out on the rock in plain view. But both were too engrossed in their work, I suppose, to notice me or even to hear the splash, to my ears prodigious loud, which my sinker made.

On my way back to camp I filled my arms with wood and then went out again for more. It was all but night-black beneath the trees, and I had to jump lively to lay in sufficient fuel ere darkness descended for good.

When the light failed at last, I returned to the platform and kindled a roaring blaze. We had unthinkingly let our former fire go out; so I was forced to strike one of our matches. Still, this was only the second match we had used since the loss of our outfit; which left us a remainder of twenty eight.

I sat down against the front of the grotto with my feet towards the fire. . . . Twenty eight matches; I wished they had been twenty eight loaves of bread. My stomach was beginning to hunger after a civilized thing like bread, and I believe I would have sacrificed

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the largest fish in the Marmac for a single slice. But still, I reflected, we had some turkey.

At the thought I arose and fetched out our supper and spread it in the firelight. Somehow it didn't look so good as it did this morning; maybe because it was cold, or maybe too because I had been thinking of bread. Nevertheless, it was all we had, and you may be sure I wasn't turning up my nose; I would fall on presently, when Ned and Hal returned, and be thankful too. Only, I was wishful of a little bread.

Then, as I sat there with my knees drawn up under my chin, staring into the fire, an owl screeched suddenly on the hill above me. I started and reached for the rifle standing beside me against the face of the grotto. Somehow, the eerie cry had raised my vague apprehensions and called up again the vision of hideousness which I had seen on the other shore but which I had for the while forgot. I seemed now to feel it close about me somewhere, and once when I lifted my eyes across the flames I fancied momentarily that the grisly specter was peering at me out of the darkness beyond. At another time it was in the grotto behind me; I could all but see it with the tail of my eye; it was crawling out now, on its hands and knees; it would lay its clammy fingers on my shoulder and demand the letter we had stolen from it.

I jumped to my feet. This ghost-dreaming would never do. People went crazy that way. I must be up and doing, I told myself. So I hustled about and tried my best to throw off this incubus of morbid fancies and forebodings. I laid a few more brands

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on the fire, whistled a stave or two, and walked to the edge of the platform to see if I could catch a glimpse of Ned and Hal.

It was pitch-dark down in front of me, though the firelight danced dimly on the leaves of the nearest trees. Here and there beyond the shadow of the hill I could make out the uncertain glimmer of the river but was unable to discern any sign of our boat. Over-head, through a rent in the thick foliage, the stars were shining in a sapphire sky ; twinkling and sparkling like so many brilliants.

Then, of a sudden, as I stood gazing upward, Ned's welcome voice came ringing across the water :

“Get the supper out, Bert! We're coming.”

And shortly after sounded the dip and splash of oars, and in a minute or two he and Hal appeared over the brink of the platform.

CHAPTER XIV

A Nocturnal Visitor of Another Sort

“WELL,” said I, “you fellows were slow enough baiting.”

“You could ‘a’ probably done it faster, you could,” Ned flung back. “Thank heaven we had to use up all the worms; no more baiting to-night for me. Where’s the turkey?”

Hal looked in his cap to see if all the dirt was out. Then he put it on.

“Well,” said he, “if I only had worms to last me, I’d run the line all night by myself.”

“All the fish you’d catch too,” said Ned, his mouth full of meat.

We ate in silence after that, each of us busy on his piece of turkey. It was not till the bones were sucked clean and thrown down the hill that any of us cared to speak. Then, wiping his mouth on his sleeve, “Well, fellows,” said Ned quite cheerfully (we were all a bit more cheerful now, I think), “we’ve got to stand watch again, I guess, turn about. And if any catamounts come nosing around when you’re on watch you’ll oblige me by waking a fellow.”

“We’ve got to have an eye out for Jerry Bottom, too,” Hal warned. “He might slip by us during the night.”

“But you can’t see anything now,” said I, “even if he did come.”

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"Oh, we can keep our ears open," he returned. "The blamed old moon will be up pretty soon anyway. . . . Say!" he added suddenly, "let's run the line as soon as we see the moon."

Ned was stretched out in the light of the fire, scribbling busily in his diary. He paused, holding up his pencil.

"That's a good idea, Hal," he seconded. "Then we can turn in."

"I wish we had more worms," was all Hal said.

After that Hal and I talked in a low voice on our side of the fire, while Ned wrote on the other. Now and again he would raise his head and ask us a question and then go on scribbling. I marveled where he could find so much material; but afterwards, when I came to read his diary, I found that he had related the incidents of our trip down to the smallest particular. He ceased writing at last, put away his note-book and pencil, and joined us. Our conversation then drifted towards the treasure (or what we supposed was treasure), and we passed the time making various conjectures as to the locality of Hunter's Hill, as to what was probably meant by "ten" and "fifteen"—whether yards, feet, or inches—and as to whether the treasure would be buried very deep down or only a little way beneath the surface. When we had all but exhausted our powers of speculation, I mentioned the strange misgivings that had been stirring in my mind on account of the reappearance of Tom Crawford. But Ned and Hal pooh-poohed my fears and said a dead man couldn't hurt anybody.

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“Why, look,” argued Hal, “a dead man don’t come back to life again. His soul either goes to hell, and he can’t come back, or else it goes to heaven, and he don’t want to come back.” “But what if he goes to purgatory?” I objected. “You didn’t think of that.” “Well,” he admitted, somewhat taken aback, “that’s right. But then, if a person got that far safely he wouldn’t want to come back either. I don’t think I would at least.”

“Oh, it’s not his coming back to life that I’m afraid of,” said I. “I know dead folks stay dead all right. Only, I claim there’s something mighty funny about his bobbing up again where we’re camping. It looks kinda like there’s something wrong with this treasure.”

But Ned and Hal only laughed again and scouted my uneasy presentiments for a bit of superstitious nonsense. For all that, I could tell by the way they talked that they weren’t so cock-sure of themselves as they wished to be.

Well, by and by the moon came up, and Ned and Hal went off to run the line. I listened intently for the splashing of a fish, but I heard nothing. Only, once in a while an indistinct murmur of words would float across the water; and occasionally the dull sound of one of the rock sinkers striking against the side of the boat.

It didn’t take them so long to run the line this time, for a short while after came the dip of oars again; and presently they were at the shore.

“Get anything?” I called down.

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“Five little channels,” answered Hal, and then I heard him tell Ned to cut a stringer.

When they got up to camp Hal announced that all the worms were gone; that most likely the minnows were at work.

“Well,” said I, “that’ll be enough for breakfast; and then maybe we can try for those other two turkeys.”

“Yes, we can *try* for them,” says Ned. “Why, I’ll bet those two turkeys are down in China by this time.”

“Well, anyway,” Hal suggested, “let’s turn in and get some sleep. How are we going to guard camp? same as last night?”

I said I would like to have the daybreak watch; and so, after a little talk, the other two settled that Ned would stand guard first and Hal second.

It was somewhat after ten, I should suppose, when Hal and I retired within the grotto and drew our blankets around us. But before Hal lay down (or rather knotted himself up, which is his peculiar position while sleeping) I noticed that he knelt for a minute or two at his prayers. It was a reminder to me, so I got up and said mine too; and then lay down again.

But it was long ere I fell asleep; very long indeed, as you shall see. What with thinking on the dead man and trying to argue down my persistent forebodings, I remained wide awake. I tried shutting my eyes after a while and counting up to nine over and over again; but it was no use, the same sense of ill

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and insecurity always returned, staving off sleep. Then I lay with my eyes open, looking at the things about me; in this way, I thought, I might grow drowsy and gradually doze off. Across from me, on the other side of our little den, Hal was lying with his face against the wall, the firelight flickering duskily over his huddled form. Outside, the flames were dancing and crackling in the faggots, and beyond, among the leafy tree-boughs, shafts of pale moonbeams stood slantingly. At the corner of the grotto Ned was sitting with his back against the rock. I could see the profile of his face, with the red blaze upon it, and the muzzle of the rifle that was lying across his knees.

For a long time I let my eyes linger from object to object, from Hal to the fire, from the fire to the trees, from the trees to Ned; but at the end of it I was no nearer sleep than at the beginning. At length, weary with the very effort, I rolled over on my back and stared up at the vault above me. I had lain in this position for perhaps five minutes when from somewhere down the hillside a voice called out:

“Hullo, up thar’! Hullo!”

I started to a sitting posture, all trembling and shaking like a girl. My fears were being realized. I recognized that voice; it was the voice of Jerry Bottom!

Ned had jumped to his feet and stepped forward a pace.

“Well,” he answered, “what do you want?”

“You couldn’t give us the loan of a match or two now, could you, pard?” asked the voice.

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Ned hesitated. Then, "Yes, we can spare a few, I guess," he called back.

The voice was silent, but I could hear the sound of someone laboring up the hill. My first impulse was to go out on the platform with Ned, but then, I reflected, if our visitor had any evil designs upon us, he would certainly not have adopted this open manner of approach. So, unclasping my hunting knife, I lay back again as if I were asleep. But I kept my eyes wide open, you may be sure, for I had a clear view of most of the platform, and meant to spring to Ned's assistance if any foul work were attempted.

Nearer and nearer came the footsteps. Then, suddenly, beyond the flames, a head and shoulders appeared above our ledge. I shuddered a little, I suppose, as I lay there; for it was the head and shoulders of Jerry Bottom. The scar on his face gleamed ugly and menacing in the firelight; and his evil eyes glanced sharply from under his low drawn felt hat.

Then, seeing Ned, "Wal, wal, bub," said he quite friendly, "a snug little berth as ever I laid eyes on. Rain er blow, you're ready f'r anything, says you. How might a man git up thar' now fer a sociable chat, like??"

Ned told him to come around to the side.

"A reg'ler front door, too, on'y at the side. Wal now, that *is* keen. It takes a bright lad to find a spot like this, hit do; an' I'll lay my fort'n' you've got a head on yer two shoulders. Soon as I clapped my eyes on you standin' thar', I says to myself, 'Bill,' says I,

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'that boy's promisin'. He's smart, he is,' says I. Oh,'" he broke off in a lower tone, coming out within my vision upon the platform, "'frien's too, heh? and asleep. An' you wouldn't want 'em woke up neither, says you. An' right you was; ole Bill, he'll talk a little lower.'"

"Well," said Ned, "we're standing watch by turns, and they ought to get their share of sleep. Here are the matches you asked for."

The old villain held out his hand, smiling, and took them. I never saw a larger hand in my life, or an uglier. The fingers were as thick as lead pipe, and the nails black and broken. To think that these were the fingers that had so cruelly garotted poor Tom Crawford!

"How you do come to the p'int!" said he, shaking his great head in admiration. "I said you was a smart lad from the first. You'll go right up in life, you will. You'll be a bank president, and I shouldn't wonder. But thanky fer the matches, bub," he added, putting them in his pocket.

I couldn't but marvel at the size of the man. Ned, who was standing across the fire from him, looked like a dwarf in comparison.

"And if you wouldn't have no objections now," he resumed, squatting down on his heels beside the fire and holding out his hands, "I'd take it kind of you if you'd give me a few handfuls o' this here blaze. Me an' Hank, we been on the river since sundown, and a man gits pretty chill a-settin' on the water all that time." He leaned forward and sent a squirt of

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tobacco juice into the fire. "Thar' now, that do feel like home. I declar', hit beats all how a fire k'n smarten a man up, like." Then, with a glance upward, "So hit's a fishin' trip you and yer frien's is on, is it, bub?" he asked.

Ned told him yes.

"An' I lay you ketched a right smart lot, too, heh?"

No, Ned answered, we hadn't caught many after the first night; the river washed us out.

"Wal, that *was* a plum-buster, that was, an' no mistake. I ain't see her that high in ten year. Washed out, heh? Wal, washouts don't hurt bright pennies like you. You made up yer mind to keep on fishin', you did. You wasn't goin' to leave the river, says you; no, not by a long shot. I reckon now you're just kind o' floatin' down, campin' in likely spots, heh? er mebbe you're goin' to stay here fer a while, and I shouldn't wonder?"

Ned replied that Valley Junction was the end of our journey, and that we were traveling by easy stages and pitching our camp wherever we thought the fishing good.

"Was you pullin' out to-morrer then?" he asked, standing up. But seeing Ned hesitate, "Wal, I *have* ast a power o' questions," he owned, by way of apology. "But whenever I meet a bright lad like you with a head on his two shoulders I allus say to myself, 'Bill, ole timber, you just put a few questions to that thar' boy and watch him answer, and you'll l'arn something, you will,' says I." Here he spat into the fire again. "Wal, good-night, bub. Thanky fer the

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matches, thanky kindly. Pay my respecks to yer frien's. Ole Bill's goin' to th' other side; if you should be a-wantin' his he'p you just shout. But you won't need no he'p, not you. You got yer rifle, says you. You ain't afeared, says you. No, by gum, an' you ain't neither."

Running on in this absurd manner, he went off down the hillside, making a deal of cheerful noise in the still night. When I heard him speak to his "friend Hank" down on the bank, I judged that he was out of earshot and stole softly to the mouth of the grotto. I called in a low voice, and Ned, who was standing at the brink of the platform, whipped about. In two bounds he was at my side and had me by the arm.

"Do you know who was here?" he whispered excitedly.

"Yes," said I. "I heard every word. What do you think he was after?"

"He wanted to find out who we were and what we intend to do. That's what he wanted."

"Well," said I, "he got what he wanted. You told him just what we do intend to do."

"And that's just the trick! Now we can follow them as close as we want, and they'll never suspect a thing. Don't you see?"

"Well," said I, "maybe. You go to sleep now; I'll take Hal's watch. I can't sleep anyway."

Ned was only too willing to be relieved, and so, after warning me to keep a sharp lookout, he crept back in the grotto. And shortly after, to my astonishment, I heard him snore.

CHAPTER XV

I Pull in My Throw-Line

WHEN I first began my watch I was very uneasy in my mind, as you may suppose. For all his show of friendliness, I strongly suspected some sinister design on the part of old Bottom; for the man, I knew, was a murderer, with the blood of at least two victims on his hands. There was no telling what he might be up to; perhaps he was even now skulking somewhere close at hand; perhaps he meant to return stealthily with his companion, take us unawares and slaughter the three of us. And so, with my eyes scanning anxiously the belt of darkness about me, I took up my position at the mouth of the grotto and held the cocked rifle in readiness to shoot upon the first sign of any treachery.

But five minutes had not elapsed before I was most agreeably disappointed. Although I had not heard them put out from shore nor seen their boat upon the river, I soon perceived a red glow through the trees and knew that the scoundrels were camping, sure enough, on the other bank.

This knowledge was a great relief to me, and I passed the remainder of the night with a feeling of comparative security. But I did not call Hal to stand a watch, for sleep was as far away from my eyes as ever. Now and again I would take a turn on the platform and

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then throw a billet or two on the fire ; but for the most time I remained seated, leaning against the grotto and hearkening to the voices of the night: the chirping of myriad insects, the deep bellowing of bullfrogs down the river, the lonesome cry of an owl up on the hill behind me, and far off the occasional yelp of some wild animal. Gradually, as I sat there, the glow of fire on the opposite shore died down to a mere point of light and then disappeared entirely ; and I supposed that our unwelcome neighbors were asleep.

All this while the moon rose steadily higher and had by now passed its zenith and was making down towards the western sky. It was a marvelously clear moon, with a radiance like daylight. Although for the greater part I could see it only by bright fragments through the silver-twinkling leaves, yet once as it floated into an open space between the foliage I beheld its broad lustrous circuit and thought that I had never looked upon a more simply beautiful thing in God's creation.

Then, suddenly, a sort of tremor ran through the trees about me ; they murmured low all along the hill-side, as if whispering one to the other ; and then once more fell as suddenly still. After a little they began murmuring again, a soft rustling sound that filled all the air and set the quiet night astir.

It was a chill wind, though fresh and fragrant, and I buttoned my coat against it. Then, getting to my feet, I kicked some unburned ends of wood into the blaze and laid on a few new pieces. When I raised my eyes from the pulsing red coals there was a grayish kind of half-light all around me that had not been

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there before ; and above me on the hillside a bird piped weakly. Looking up through the trees, I saw the round disc of the moon still glowing in the west, but far over the eastern hills the stars were paling visibly in an ashen sky: and I knew that the dawn was breaking

Rapidly, then, came the day, and I watched it as it came. It was as if the firmament were some vast canvas, and an unseen hand were laying on the colors: the dark, slate-gray horizon waxed lighter and lighter; little by little a wide russet fan opened out, and down at its handle shone a golden olive nimbus; and now its fringes began to appear, and they were of a delicate azure with pale suggestions of sea-shell pink; then, swiftly, the fan was swept shut, and behind it lay a rolling flood of crimson and violet, the colors flowing into each other till you could hardly tell which was which; suddenly, long rosy streaks, the fingers of the day, felt far across the mantled sky; and now, low upon the horizon, the gorgeous East had transformed itself into a broad sea of liquid gold; and just beneath its surface lay the sun.

I turned then and looked at the moon. If ever a thing showed wan and faded and lack-lustre it was that white rag plastered up there against the bright blue sky. Chapfallen and out of countenance indeed was the Queen of Night.

It must have been after four now, and although I thought I would have a look at my line before the others awoke, still I considered it better to let my bait lie a while longer as I remembered Hal's saying that the dawn was the likeliest time for fishing. So I curbed

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my impatience and sat down again upon the platform.

Across the river there was no sign of life. Save for the boat, moored beneath a willow, I could descry nothing of our neighbors or of their camp. Turning my head, I saw Ned and Hal, wrapped in their blankets, still sound asleep in the grotto.

By this time the sun was well risen, and round about me in the trees the birds were caroling blithely. I have never known much about birds (though I have seen many of them, and wild ones too) nor paid much attention to their singing. But on this particular morning I listened with a kind of joyful wonder at my heart. I have never heard more profuse, gladder, or more cheering sounds. The whole hillside was athrob with the whistling, the morning light shone brighter and gayer for it, the trees looked greener, and I who had not had a wink of sleep on account of my dark misgivings felt as lively and happy as though dead men and murderers, hazardous adventures and doubtful treasure, were but the things of a story-book.

Well, what with the birds a-singing all around me, as I say, and everything looking so fresh and pleasant in the sweet sunshine, I fell to thinking more and more of my throw-line and entertaining greater and greater hopes until I could restrain myself no longer and stole away to see what in truth my prodigious bait had brought me.

It was a matter of only a minute or so to cross the ravine and come down on the little jut of rock from which I had cast my German sausage. As I hurried along I had, of course, the most sanguine expectations:

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a picture of the line, taut and straining, stood before my eyes; even the gnarled cedar scrub I imagined to be half torn from its rocky bed and only holding by one slender root. It was just possible, I told myself, that the largest fish in this part of the Marmac had swallowed my hook.

Fancy, then, my disappointment when, bursting out from the woods upon the ledge, I saw my line hanging limp and lifeless against the face of the rock. And what was worse, the sinker had evidently slipped loose, for the line was washed against the shore and lay trailing downstream upon the surface of the water. It was with a pretty long face, I suppose, that I stooped down and untied it. Then, by a few turns of it around my hand I took up the slack and felt only the steady throbbing of the current. The sinker had indeed slipped off; the first feel even of the sinker would have been some slight satisfaction, but this too was denied me. I was hauling in the most disappointingly light and empty bit of fishing-tackle a boy ever laid hands on.

Only a few more yards remained. Leaning out over the water, I began to lift the line in order, if possible, to catch a glimpse of the hook; but in the act my arm was jerked violently forward, and, losing my balance, I pitched headlong into the river!

My first confused knowledge, after the sudden shock of cold water, was that someone had me by the hand and was dragging me down deeper and deeper into the river. Then, like a flash, I remembered the line that was wrapped around my hand; there was a fish

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at the end of it ; he had pulled me off the rock and was now drawing me down into the depths !

You may fancy my feelings ! I knew that I must have hooked a monster of a fish, and my whole soul was set on having him ; and yet, unless I let go the line in another twenty seconds, I should certainly drown. And then I realized, to my despairing horror, that letting go the line was quite beyond my power. My hand was drawn far out in front of me, and the cord was bound like steel around it. Add to this that I was lying more than half upon my back, my head down and my heels up ; and in my ears the murmurous thunder of the river.

I struggled and fought. With my free arm I beat the water, striving to raise myself to the surface ; but in vain. Deeper and farther into the very bowels of the stream I was being hurried along. My ears were roaring now, and I thought my lungs would burst for want of air. Explosions of fire, in rapid succession, flashed before my vision. Every moment I thought I must drown ; and yet, contrary to the common experience of drowning men, no panorama of my past life fleeted through my mind ; I thought only, in a vague and wandering way, of how I was going to land my fish.

By this time the roaring in my ears had grown into one long thundering detonation, the bursting bolts of light before my eyes blazed out more brilliantly, and I think I must have been on the very point of opening my mouth to the choking water when, suddenly, to my dazed consciousness there came the sen-

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sation of idly floating upward. You may be sure I accelerated my motion. In a trice I had whipped off the line from my all but paralyzed hand, and, still retaining the end, in two strokes shot to my armpits clear of the water.

Gasping for air, I lay on my back for a moment or two, drifting with the current. And then, with a start, I recollected that the line had gone slack. My fish, then, was off!

Overwhelmed with disappointment (and oddly enough too, for the cause of it had been the saving of my life), I dejectedly made for the shore, scarce caring whether I got there or not. I had not taken three strokes, however, when, the slack gathering up, I felt a steady and rather heavy drag. I couldn't imagine what it might be unless it were a water-logged piece of brush; for there was no life in the feel of it. Six or seven feet from the bank I was lucky enough to find bottom. Then, after a few steps farther, I secured a purchase with my feet, standing waist-deep among the uneven rocks, and turned to pull in the dead weight.

But all of a sudden it became a very live weight! The line gave a tremendous heave that well-nigh fetched me beyond my depth, and I knew that my fish was still hooked fast.

Bracing my two feet against the sides of a small boulder, I leaned back and began drawing him in hand over hand. But it was no easy business, I can tell you. I thought at first that he must be pretty thoroughly used up, for he had made no fight while I was towing him to shore; but I soon discovered that he had

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strength enough and to spare. Indeed, I could hardly handle him at all. He shot out this way and that, making the quivering taut line froth and hum through the water in abrupt little arcs five feet in front of me. I pulled in another yard; then I felt him lifting towards the surface, and I gained a bit more of the line; the next moment he dived, my arms thrust suddenly out, and I all but lost my balance. It was a savage plunge, and would have been enough to capsize a boat.

All this time I had not had a glimpse of him; and with what eagerness I longed for that glimpse you may well imagine. He must have been some thirty feet away now, and I was drawing him steadily in. I remember saying to myself that his game was up, that I had him now for sure; when, on a sudden, the line fell slack, dead slack, between my dripping fingers, and my heart gave a thump within me. And then, ere I quite knew what to make of it, out there on the shining surface of the river, just beneath the furthest tip of a downward arching willow, the water swirled in a swift eddy, and I saw one wing of a great gray tail flash upward in the sunlight.

You may be sure I stood daft no longer, but hauled him in as quickly as I could, for I knew I still had him. The next instant the line straightened with a smack and the struggle began anew.

But now his strength was spending fast. Though he still plunged like a bucking horse, I walked right out on the bank, fetching him in hand over hand. And then, five feet from shore, he suddenly gave up the fight, floated sidewise to the surface and lay there with

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one wicked eye bent on me, his captor. For the moment I stood stock-still with amazement and a little fear. An enormous fish he was, a channel-cat that looked as big as a shark. I was half afraid to draw him in, he seemed so huge and powerful. But this feeling passed in a jiffy, and with a wild joy at my heart I swept him to the bank, jumped in to my knees, reached down and caught him by the gills. He gave one mighty flop, but the next moment I had him on land and was dragging him up behind the trees.

There, as he lay panting among the leaves, I stood and surveyed him, my heart beating high with pride and excitement. He was of extraordinary size; I don't think I exaggerate one whit when I say that he weighed between a hundred and a hundred and twenty-five pounds. His glistening back was of the color of slate, shading off at the sides into a lightish gray and dotted by irregular black patches. There was an air of malevolence about him too. His dorsal fin stood up like a sword blade, there was a menace gleaming in his round white eyes, and even his long whiskers twirled angrily: altogether, he was a vicious-looking fish.

But what a surprise I had for Ned and Hal! How they would open their eyes when they saw me with a fish almost as big as myself, and a channel-cat at that!

CHAPTER XVI

We Break Camp

FIRED by the thought, I quickly looped the line twice through one of the fish's gills and hoisted him on my back. He gave two or three flops that staggered and almost upset me; but I had him in my own element now, and his struggles were useless.

Hoping that the others were still asleep, I made my way along the hillside as noiselessly as I could (though you may imagine this was not easy with a hundred-pound fish on my shoulders). I wished to surprise them completely. I would lay my channel-cat before the mouth of the grotto and then awake them.

Well, when I reached camp, sure enough, both were sound asleep. "Hey," I called, "wake up, you fellows! I've got something to show you."

Hal stirred and sat up.

"Uh? Wha'? Wha's 'at? My watch?"

Ned was sitting up now, rubbing his eyes. He was the first to spy what lay at my feet.

"Gee-min-ently!" he cried, and with one bound was out of the grotto and bending over the fish. "Look, Hal!"

But Hal didn't need any invitation to look. He was broad awake now and gazing in sheer wonder at my catch.

For the first moment or so both were too surprised

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to ask any questions. Then Hal, his eyes still glued on the fish, spoke his first word, and his voice was full of a strange awe.

“A channel-cat, too!” he said.

Then, suddenly straightening up, he looked at Ned and me with triumph in his eyes. “Tell me worms can’t catch big fish!”

“Worms!” I cried scornfully. “I caught him on turkey guts!—with my meat-hook too,” I added, glancing at Ned.

And then I told them my whole story. You should have seen those two fellows! I’ll wager Hal, for one, didn’t draw breath the whole time I was talking. At the end he gave a great sigh.

“Gol-lee Moses! I’d give a million dollars to ‘a’ been in your place—a quadrillion million dollars!”

“Look,” said Ned. He was down on all fours, peering into the fish’s mouth which he was holding open with a couple of sticks. “Look here. Here’s the hook sticking down in his throat. He must have swallowed it all right; but he almost got rid of it.”

Sure enough, he had disgorged most of the shank, but the barb had served its purpose well and was safely lodged in the wall of his gullet.

“I wonder how long he is,” said Hal, and lay down beside him on the rock. “Are my feet even with his tail? There, he’s longer’n I am, isn’t he?”

He was in fact a half inch longer; and Hal, I think, at that time was over five feet tall.

“I’ll bet he weighs a hundred an’ fifty pounds,” said Ned enthusiastically.

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Hal closed one eye, looking at the fish with a calculating air. Then he shook his head.

“Nope,” he pronounced; “not over a hundred an’ ten, Ned. . . . Well, maybe a hundred an’ twelve,” he conceded slowly.

“We ought to put him in the water again anyway, oughtn’t we?” said I. “Or else he’ll die.”

Hal patted the fish’s head.

“This old boy die? Not on your life! Catfish don’t die out of water. They’re like turtles; they don’t die ‘cept you chop their heads off, and then they keep on moving. Of course, if you keep ‘em out for a *very* long time they’ll die; so’ll turtles, I guess. What we’d better do, I s’pose,” he added, “is to braid some of this trot-line together. He might saw through one piece; he’s got pretty sharp teeth. I’ll braid if you fellows hold the ends. Then we can slip it through his gills and put him in down near the boat.”

In a little while Hal had plaited up about a foot and a half, which was long enough to go through the fish’s gill and mouth and be knotted together; to this we secured a double length of line which would allow him sufficient play.

“Now,” said I, “I’ll slip this piece of wood through the braid, and we can carry him easier. Take the other end, Ned.”

But just then Hal uttered an exclamation and pointed out through the screen of foliage before the platform.

“Look there! Across the river! Who’s that?”

I turned and peered through the leaves. There,

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standing on the open bank above his boat and looking our way, was Jerry Bottom, and behind him among the trees the smoke of a campfire. Ned dropped his end of the stick, and the fish thumped down against the platform. It's a wonder to me it didn't die, for during the next ten minutes we let it lie there unheeded. But then, as Hal had said, "Catfish don't die out of water."

"That's Jerry Bottom, Hal," said Ned, his voice falling instinctively to a lower pitch. "Gee! I forgot all about him. He was up here last night." And then he recounted the visit we had received.

"Well," said Hal at the end, "if you told him we were floating down to Valley Junction, I guess we'd better not hang around here too long. They might suspect something."

"That's right," Ned agreed. "Here's what we got to do then." He squatted on his heels, pushed his hat back and, driving home each point with a thrust of his forefinger, outlined a new course of action. "They'll be waiting for us to start ahead of them; I'm pretty sure of that. Well, our other plan was to let them go ahead of us, and we'd follow them. Now we've got to change that. We've got to go ahead of them. If we don't, they'll begin to think we're in their secret, as Hal says. And we've got to keep them thinking that we don't know anything at all about 'em. Still, we don't want to start too early and lose 'em. They may not leave at all. This may be Hunter's Hill right here for all we know, and the treasure not ten feet away."

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I started and glanced about me.

“No,” said Hal, “the treasure’s not ten feet away. I’ve looked at every single oak-tree around here, and there isn’t a one with a mark on it. None o’ them’s been cut.”

“Well,” said Ned with a gesture, “I didn’t think so myself. Anyway, here’s what I’d say. We’ll cook our breakfast, get everything packed and ready to load” (you would think we had a dozen trunks), “and then sit around quiet for a couple of hours. If they don’t pull out by that time, we’ll start ourselves. And we’ll make a lot of noise about it too, to let them know we’re leaving. I guess that ought to throw ‘em off the scent.”

“That’s all right,” Hal approved; “only we’ve got to take out our line.”

“If you fellows take out the line,” said I, “I’ll cook those five channel-cats. I want to take off my clothes and dry ‘em anyway.”

Well, after a little arguing about this, we all finally agreed, and, taking up our big fish, we went down to the river. When we got there Jerry Bottom had disappeared from the opposite bank; the only sign of our neighbors was their boat and the smoke of their campfire hanging in the woods.

Hal and Ned, then, rowed away to take out the line while I peeled off my wet clothes and laid them in a sunny place to dry. After that, I cleaned the fish and cooked them as well as I could (which wasn’t very well, to be sure); and then I shook out the blankets and rolled them up against our departure. By

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this time Ned and Hal had returned from the river, and the three of us fell to on our breakfast of broiled fish. Though my appetite was razor sharp, I must say I sorely missed a little salt. Still, the fish was good; it was cooked food; and after I had brushed off the flakes of ash I made as excellent a breakfast as could be wished for under the circumstances.

When we had done eating we tarried according to our plan, waiting for Bottom and Webb to take the lead downstreem. But never a move they made. We must have lingered there on the platform for upwards of three hours, talking a little now and then and growing more and more impatient all the while. But there was no sign of striking camp on the other shore. I rather suspect now that they were playing the same game as we. It was just possible, now that I think back on it, that they had an inkling of our knowledge of them and of their search. At all events, we agreed at length that it was useless to delay longer; that it was more expedient for us to start at once and to loiter down the river a half mile or so and then to pitch camp again; or better, to conceal our boat, if we could, and to lie in wait till they passed.

And so, without making any bones about it, but, on the contrary, talking a great deal and rather more loudly than was necessary, we stowed our goods in the boat, saw that our channel-cat was fast secured (Hal had already given him the unaccountable name of "Barnum"), got aboard and swung out into mid-stream.

We had just come opposite their camp when Jerry

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Bottom stepped out on the bank, a pipe in his mouth, and surveyed us calmly for a moment or two. Then, removing his pipe,

“Any luck, boys?” he called out genially.

I, who was sitting in the stern, reached back and raised Barnum’s head.

The old villain whistled in admiration.

“That thar’s a big fish an’ no mistake!” he cried. “Biggest fish ever I see, I reckon. But what’d I say last night?” He pointed his pipe at us, shaking it emphatically. “I says you boys was bright pennies and knowed a thing er two, fishin’ inclooded, says I, *you kin bet.*”

We didn’t know exactly what to answer to this absurd flattery, so I called back that we were going on down the river now. This was evidently the bit of information he wanted, for, after wishing us good-bye and good-luck, he put his pipe back in his mouth and reentered the wood.

We didn’t say anything for some time; each of us, I imagine, was thinking of the outcome of our treasure hunt and what our chances were against the cunning miscreants back there on the shore.

Well, presently we passed over a gentle rapids and saw on our left a deep run of backwater lying beneath slanting willows and tall, vine-draped sycamores. It was an enticing place to camp; the fishing was probably good there, as Hal said. But we had not left Bottom and Webb far enough behind yet to warrant our landing; so we only peered up the long green vista as we passed.

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The right bank all along here was steep hillside, with high and beetling bluffs standing up at intervals straight from the river. We were, I suppose, quite a mile below our former camp and just above one of these tall faces of rock when, chancing to look towards the corner of the cliff, I spied a rill of water spouting over a stone and plumping down into a pool at the margin of the river.

“A spring!” I cried. “There’s a spring! Now for a nice cold drink!”

With a sweep of his oar Ned swung the boat’s nose around and made for the bank. When we jumped ashore we found that the streamlet came down from above, plashing over rocks and forming some very pretty little cascades.

“Let’s go up to the source,” said Ned, “and drink from the spring itself.”

We started up the hillside, making our way through the bushes and trees that grew abundantly in the rocky soil. Every moment we expected to come upon the source, but it was only after we had climbed more than half the distance up the hill and were just even with the top of the bluff that we found the spot where the water issued from the ground. Beneath a shielding slab of stone, in a little round basin set about with ferns, the cold crystal spring welled and bubbled.

Though we had been thirsty enough before, after our climb you may well fancy we took more than one draught of this refreshing water. When we had drunk our fill we rested for a while, and then Hal proposed descending again.

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"We've got to keep an eye on Barnum," he warned ; "the old rascal may pull the boat away." And with that he jumped up and, shouting over his shoulder, "Come on, you fellows," went slithering down the slope.

"Well, I'm going to have a look off this bluff before I go down," declared Ned, and began to walk around the precipice towards where it beetled over the river.

For a little I was in two minds which to follow. Then, curiosity getting the better of me, I started after Ned.

Thinking that I should arrive first at the front of the cliff, I clambered cater-cornered up the hill through a thicket of stunted cedars and buckberry bushes. For you must know that the bluff bowed out into the river and that from its edge, throughout the entire curve, it tilted sharply upward to the hilltop. It was across this rounded declivity that I was now making my way. At length, judging that I was abreast of the furthest projection of the bluff, I began to descend. I was a prodigious distance above the river, as I could tell ; through the cedars around me I caught glimpses of waving sunlit treetops. They were right at my feet, it seemed ; with a run and a jump I fancied I might have landed among them. And yet I knew that they were the trees of the opposite shore.

The cedars were getting thinner now, and I began to go more warily, for the ground was as steep as a roof. Then, just as I gained a clear view of the brink

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and the far-lying country beyond, an incident befell that struck me sick and faint. I saw Ned, who was directly down in front of me, suddenly grasp a shrub and lean over the horrid abyss. Then, in a trice, he turned, ran back a few paces, wheeled again, and, while my eyes started from their sockets and my heart ceased beating, raced to the edge of the precipice and hurled himself over.

CHAPTER XVII

Ned Rescues Little Nettie

FOR a moment I was weak and utterly dazed. Sky and treetops, quite topsy-turvy, swam before my vision, and I dropped to the ground all of a heap. Then, once more, my strength and presence of mind returned, and I hastened forward to the brink of the precipice. But one glance down that frightful depth, and a giddiness came over me that well-nigh pitched me headlong. I fell flat on my face and dug my fingers into the sandy turf. Slowly then I worked myself forward again until my eyes commanded a complete view of the river below.

The first object I saw was a man in a boat some twenty feet, maybe, from the opposite shore. He was pulling on the oars with all his might; and, as far above him as I was, I could see how his head was buried down between his shoulders with the efforts he was putting forth.

And then I saw Ned. He was swimming furiously, about a boat's length and a half from the shore and just a bit downstream from where the base of the cliff ran into the hillside. Several yards in front of him there seemed to be something like a ripple on the quiet surface; and, as I was wondering what this might be, suddenly a few feet further down two little arms appeared, waving frantically, followed by a white

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upturned face. I cried aloud in my utter helplessness; for I was witnessing the last struggles of a drowning child.

For an agonizing moment the white face with its frightened eyes strained upward, framed in a circle of floating hair. Then, swiftly, the water closed over it, the arms sank down, and I was gazing with despair at my heart upon two little hands still feebly moving above the surface.

But I had forgotten Ned. Though he was all along within the range and almost within the focus-point of my vision, I had overlooked him. Now with a tremendous effort he made one last stroke, shot his right arm forward and grasped the fingers of the nearest hand. In a trice he had raised the child to the surface, turned over on his back and was towing her to shore. It was only a short distance he had to swim, and when, panting and stumbling, he dragged himself up the bank with the little girl in his arms, I could have applauded in admiration of his gallant and daring act.

Before he was well out of the water, however, the man in the boat, who had been rowing all the while with the madness of desperation, reached the shore at last and leaped out with a hoarse cry.

Ned swung round, the child still in his arms. The stranger sprang up the bank; and,

“Is she alive?” he cried, snatching her from Ned and clasping her to his breast in a kind of frenzy.

Then Ned said something I did not hear, but the man, who was evidently her father, laid the child upon

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the ground, and the two of them began the work of resuscitating her.

It was an anxious while, and I, still lying at the brink of the precipice, watched the outcome breathlessly. Presently Ned straightened up, but the father still remained bent over the little form and gazing intently into the pallid face. Then he too knelt upright, and my heart sank within me. The child, then, was dead.

But no! As I looked more narrowly I thought I perceived the regular rise and fall of her bosom; after a space her eyes fluttered open, a wan smile flickered on her lips, and she held up her arms to her father.

“Hip-hip-hurrah!” I cried from my perch on the cliff.

You should have seen those two wheel around and look up. But they didn’t see me till I waved my arm. Then Ned turned to the other and said something: explaining, I supposed, who I was.

“Wait till Hal and I come around,” I called, and began to crawfish from the verge of the rock. Once on my feet I hastened back over the shoulder of the bluff and plunged down the hillside, sending a great quantity of stones rolling and bounding ahead of me. I could hear them go splashing into the river below and wondered how near they were missing Hal.

“Hey!” he shouted up. “Cut that out!”

But I was now going too fast to stop, and the next moment I shot down between the trees to the water’s edge.

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"Ned's dove off the bluff," I cried, breathless, "and saved a kid's life!"

Hal didn't seem to be particularly interested.

"I didn't know there were any kids way down here," was all he said. "Where'd he come from?"

"It's not a he," I answered, getting into the boat. "It's a girl. They're right around here on the other side. Her dad's there too."

"I did hear a splash," Hal recalled, after a little, "but I thought you fellows rolled a boulder in."

Presently then we arrived in view of the bank where Ned and the stranger, with his little girl, were standing. Behind them was a trail, mostly hidden by undergrowth, that ran up a woody ravine. This ravine, as I lifted my eyes higher, seemed to be the dividing line between two hills, though it by no means separated them as a valley; only, away up on top was a sort of depression in the otherwise even sky-line. There, doubtless, was the head of the ravine.

As our boat grounded, Ned and the stranger, who was carrying his little girl — and one side of him all dripping too, but he didn't even notice that — came to meet us. Before words were spoken I had a good look at him; and I marveled that ere this I had not remarked his size and appearance.

He was a tall man, taller even than Jerry Bottom; though not quite so broad, he made up for what he lacked in bulk by the extreme liteness and wiry character of his whole frame. He wore heavy leathern boots, with gray fustian trousers stuffed into the tops; yet there was none of the slouchiness about his gait

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that is common to country folk, but rather an air of briskness. His red flannel shirt, opened at the throat, was covered by a vest that had used fair weather and foul. In his free hand he was holding his hat, an old brown felt, that had, like his vest, seen better days.

But what struck me chiefly about the man was his face. A remarkable face it was, crowned by a wealth of jet-black hair that fell below the ears. Deep dark eyes set upon it a mark of sadness and melancholy which, despite the happiness that now lighted it, could easily be discerned. The nose was straight, and the lips, above a chin clean-shaven and square, were smiling at us with frank pleasure. For a passing instant I fancied that he had one time belonged to other and better surroundings than those in which we found him. But when he spoke, though his voice was full and pleasant, I knew that he had lived all his days along the river.

“So these is your frien’s,” he said, turning to Ned. “An’ one o’ them is a brother o’ yourn; which same is the black-haired one, o’ course. Well, boys, it’s mighty glad I am to be meetin’ you. My name’s Paul Plover, an’ this here’s my little Nettie as was christened Janet, after the ole girl. We owes your brother jest everything we got, does me an’ Nettie; and the ole girl too, soon as she hears of it.”

We shook hands warmly, telling him our names. And then, kissing his little daughter with the tenderness of a woman, “Why, Nettie, you ain’t afeared o’ these boys, is you?” he said to her.

She looked at us a moment, her large brown eyes

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still troubled with the terror of the river. Then, quickly, she turned and buried her face against her father's shoulder.

"There, there now," he soothed, patting her head. "Nettie mustn't cry. . . . She don't exactly know what's happened yet," he explained, "ner who saved her, ner nothin'; only that she was in the river."

Indeed, it was as he said, she didn't know; and I pitied the poor little thing sobbing there against her father's breast, her thick chestnut hair falling dank about her shoulders and her dress dripping wet.

"Hadn't you better take her home?" I suggested.

"O' course, that's where we're goin', all of us. We was only waitin' fer you two. Come on; the ole girl 'ull be jest that tickled when I tells her."

He had turned and was going up the trail. I followed eagerly, for, I confess, I saw prospects of a square meal. But Hal caught me by the arm.

"We've got to watch for Jerry Bottom," he whispered.

But under the circumstances I wasn't very keen for Jerry Bottom or for his treasure either. Both might go hang for all I cared. Knives and forks and a table to put my legs under were worth a dozen treasures.

"Oh, darn Jerry Bottom!" I answered. "Let's get something to eat."

For a second Hal looked at me as though I had offered him a personal affront. Then he shrugged his shoulders and started up the hill.

"Oh, well," he said, "if you and Ned want to give

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up the treasure just for a dog-gone old meal and—", but I lost the rest of the sentence, which he grumbled to himself. He didn't say anything then for some time, and I knew he was as sore as a boil. Whether Ned had forgotten all about our treasure hunt or had abandoned it, I really couldn't tell. He was some distance ahead of us, walking with Mr. Plover, and of course I dared not ask him; though I think his recent experience had driven from his head all thought of Jerry Bottom and of everything else to boot.

In silence, then, Hal and I trudged along after Ned and Mr. Plover. The trail we were following led up through the ravine which, as I had surmised, divided the chain of hills at the top only by a shallow gap. The path here became steeper, and the ravine, narrowing inward, looked more like a cleft in the level plateau of the hilltop.

Rounding an elderberry bush that pushed its leafy bulk across the trail, I saw Ned and Mr. Plover mounting a stair of rough steps hewn into the clayey side of the gulch. At the same instant Hal, who was a pace behind me, plucked me by the sleeve.

"Look, Bert!" he exclaimed, pointing down the ravine. "There they go now. It's good-bye treasure for us."

I turned, and through a slit in the thick greenery saw the gleaming river and upon it, sure enough, a boat containing two men. There could be no doubt that it was Bottom and his companion; the way they looked and spoke as they spied our boat told me that, even if I had not recognized Bottom's enormous shock

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of yellow hair. The next moment they had drifted past the rift of water and were out of sight. But upon the instant a sudden inspiration flashed upon my mind: I whipped about and called to Mr. Plover. He halted, with Nettie still in his arms, upon the steps; Ned was at his side, and the two of them waited till we came up.

"Mr. Plover," said I, "do you know of a Hunter's Hill around here?"

His brow puzzled in a frown. "Hunter's *Hill*? Hunter's *Hill*?" he answered, as though trying to recall ever having heard the name. I wondered whv he put so much stress on the word "hill." Then, "Why, you must mean Hunter's *Ford*," he said, his face clearing. "That's what you mean — Hunter's Ford. That's right down below here. But I hain't never heard of any Hunter's *Hill*."

Though he asked no questions, I saw that he half expected an explanation. And an explanation jumped pat to my tongue, which wasn't a fib either. "That's it, I suppose,—Hunter's Ford. I heard a person talking about a Hunter's Hill that was down here, but I guess he got his dates mixed."

"Must 'a'," said Mr. Plover. "Nope, they hain't no Hunter's *Hill* that I knows on, and I been livin' in these parts f'r nigh on twelve year."

He turned then and went on up the stair with Ned. But I grasped Hal's arm.

"I got it, Hal!" I whispered eagerly. "It's the hill next to Hunter's Ford! I'll bet any money it is!"

NED RESCUES LITTLE NETTIE

“But s’posin’ there isn’t any hill next to Hunter’s Ford,” he answered gloomily.

“Bound to be! Hills all along here; and he said Hunter’s Ford was just below. Now we got Jerry Bottom where we want him! They can’t find that blazed oak to-day. We’ve got time to take a rest up at Paul Plover’s house, and eat dinner and maybe lay in some provisions; and then we can slip down the river and spy on ‘em. If they’re searching any hill near Hunter’s Ford, we’ll know that’s Hunter’s Hill and you can bet on that!”

But ingenious as this plan seemed to me, it didn’t take well with Hal at all. He only shook his head doubtfully and said, “Well, I s’pose.” By this time, however, the others had disappeared over the crest of the ravine, so we had to drop further talk on the matter and hasten forward.

CHAPTER XVIII

A Banquet Fit for the Gods: With Consequences

I SHALL never forget the pretty scene that met my eyes as I gained the top of the stair. Against a background of tall trees and about the middle of a long level reach of a grass-blown hilltop stood a little cottage, or rather log-cabin, all covered with green vines and with a wisp of smoke stringing from its single chimney. Beyond the cabin was a patch of waving corn, and near it, on the left, a number of neat vegetable rows. To the right was a boarded structure in a wire enclosure; which would be the chicken yard, I thought, though I saw no chickens. Further over, next to the margin of trees and beneath their shady branches lay a brown cow, quietly chewing her cud. In front of the cabin were two circular flower beds of red and white hollyhocks, fringed by a border of sweet-williams. Altogether, it was a singularly pretty spot to stumble on away out here in the wilderness; and over it all hung the soft warm radiance of a June day.

The path on which we stood led directly up to the cabin between the banks of hollyhocks. Mr. Plover and Ned were nearly at the door when suddenly it fell open, and a woman in a gingham dress, her sleeves rolled to her elbows, came out to meet them. But seeing little Nettie's condition, she stopped short. Then,

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with a cry, she caught the child to her breast, kissed her passionately three or four times, and turned to Mr. Plover for an explanation. He made a gesture towards Ned and said something; and we were near enough now to catch the woman's answer.

"You saved her!" she cried. "You! Oh, how can I thank you! She's all Plov and I have. I think I'd die if I lost her. Mama's own darling Nettie!" And she held the child once more to her heart, covering the moist hair with kisses. Then she set her down and turned to her husband. "But you haven't told me who the young man is, Plov dear."

Whereupon Mr. Plover proceeded to introduce us, but got our names so confused that we must introduce ourselves.

Mrs. Plover turned to Ned.

"Your clothes are soaking wet, Mr. Taylor. Plov dear, take him in and give him your town suit to put on while his dries. I'll change Nettie's dress in the kitchen. And then go to the spring-house and fetch up a dozen eggs and another pat of butter; more cream too. Dinner'll be ready in another half hour. Come, Nettie."

The cabin was partitioned off in two rooms. The front room, in which we sat while Ned was donning Mr. Plover's "town suit," was bed-room, parlor, and living-room combined; but neat as a pin throughout and pretty too. In one corner was an old-fashioned four-poster covered with a snowy counterpane, and against the opposite wall a little trundle-bed with a patch-quilt spread. A clothes' press, full of drawers,

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stood beside the door with an old Dutch clock atop it. The windows on either side were curtained with white muslin that was drawn together at the bottom and tied with a bright red ribbon. In the middle of the room was a plain deal table, and on it, to my surprise, I saw a row of books, an inkpot, pen, and pad of paper. The books were mostly old and very much dog-eared; they were evidently put to constant use. I picked one up and glanced at the title, “‘Gems of Poetry;’” and laid it down, wondering.

Mr. Plover must have noticed my surprise. He sat down on the edge of the bed and gave a proud little chuckle.

“I reckon you *is* a bit flabbergasted now,” said he, crossing his legs and smiling happily. “You didn’t expect to see literchure in full swing like, out here at the end of nowhere. No, no, that ain’t none o’ my business, though I wisht it was; that’s the ole girl’s doin’s. I cain’t hardly tell one letter from another, I cain’t; but the ole girl — Lord! she reads as easy as walkin’. And write! you jest had orter see her! She kin write as purty as print. An’ she’s done gone an’ learnt Nettie too. Why, that little un k’n handle a pen as smart as you or me’d handle a gun! An’ as fer readin’—it ’ud do your heart good to sit here of a night an’ listen of her a-clippin’ off them big words like they was that many bits o’ yarn. The ole girl, she tried her hand at me too,” he added, after a pause (and I remarked a shade of sadness in his tone), “but I couldn’t get all them things into my head. I’m no good, I reckon, except f’r fishin’ ‘n’ trappin’ ‘n’ sech-

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like.’’ And then more cheerfully, ‘‘Why now,’’ he went on, standing up, ‘‘I reckon I k’n show you another surprise. Look here.’’ He lifted a little curtain at the head of the bed, and there against the wall hung a foot-long crucifix. ‘‘To see me, I reckon you wouln’t be thinkin’ much o’ religion, would you now?’’

‘‘Are you a Catholic then?’’ I asked, surprised indeed.

‘‘No,’’ he answered, ‘‘I ain’t — leastways, not yet. But the ole girl is. I keep tellin’ her I’m a-goin’ to come round; and I am too, some time, fer her sake an’ Nettie’s. They’re allus a-beggin’ of me. But I don’t see what differ’nce bein’ a Cath’lic makes, s’long as a man does right. Gawd ’lmighty ain’t a-goin’ to send a man to hell ’cause he ain’t a Cath’lic. Howsoever, I’m ign’rant, I am, an’ bein’ ign’rant, I’m likely wrong. We’ll see, we’ll see . . . plenty o’ time.’’

He paused then, taking out his pipe and slowly filling it from a leathern pouch. I was about to launch a polemic on the necessity of all men belonging to the one true Church, when Mrs. Plover’s voice sounded from the kitchen:

‘‘May I come in now?’’

I glanced at Ned. He was arrayed in a white stiff-bosomed shirt, bright blue trousers, and a pair of big tan shoes. The clothes were miles too large for him; but somehow, by the way he wore it, the rig had taken on a dash of style. Indeed, I have often remarked this about Ned: put anything on his back, no matter

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how awkward and outlandish, and he manages to look not only respectable but even a little modish.

Mrs. Plover entered, leading Nettie by the hand. The little girl was much more at her ease now and looked much prettier too. Clad in a fresh checkered frock, her hair tied with a bow of pink ribbon, she was indeed as pretty as a picture.

“Now then, dearie,” said her mother, “thank Mr. Taylor for saving your life.”

She advanced somewhat timidly to Ned and put out her hand.

“Thank you ever so much, dear Mr. Taylor, for saving my life.”

Ned took both her hands in his.

“May I have my reward?” he asked.

She looked up at him, smiling and nodding her head. He caught her in his arms then, and kissed her. And by the act he won her heart completely; her father’s and mother’s too, you may be sure of that.

Well, after a while Mrs. Plover called us into the kitchen for dinner. And what a dinner it was! Ham and eggs and hot corn pone with butter, creamed potatoes and peas and fresh onions and great tumblers of spring-cooled milk—oh, I tell you it was a dinner! Mrs. Plover kept filling our plates in the kindest and most motherly way, while Mr. Plover ran on talking about one thing or another and occasionally remarking that it did a body good to see people eat like us.

Then Ned paused long enough to tell of how we had been swamped by the swollen river; which raised

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a perfect storm of sympathy on the part of Mrs. Plover.

“Plov dear,” she said at length, “we’ll make them up a hamper. There’s that big willow basket in the attic: I’ll see that they have enough provisions. . . . Mr. Cunningham, you must take some more of the potatoes.”

Well, I didn’t refuse. I had been eating like a gourmand, I suppose; but I still felt that I had room for more.

When Mrs. Plover had helped me to the potatoes Nettie got off her chair, stood on tip-toe, and whispered something into her mother’s ear.

Mrs. Plover laughed happily, hugging Nettie to her side.

“You little precious darling!” she exclaimed. And then, turning to Ned, “Do you know what she said, Mr. Taylor? She told me to be sure to put in the basket the loaf of bread she cooked yesterday; that it was for you especially.”

“I’m sure it will be the best thing in the basket,” replied Ned gallantly. At which Mrs. Plover laughed gaily, and Nettie, blushing, buried her face in her mother’s lap.

“Oh, but it won’t, I’m afraid,” said Mrs. Plover, still smiling. “Nettie’s loaves are like other people’s stoves, rather black and hard.”

Well, by this time I *was* finished. I don’t think there was a crease left in my body; I know I felt as tight as a drum. And when Mrs. Plover served a big cocoanut cake, powdered with sugar, I just had to

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decline it; but she said that some of it should find its way into our hamper.

After that we sat back in our chairs, and Mr. Plover recounted again the whole incident of Nettie's rescue. It was then for the first time that I learned how Nettie happened to be in the river at all. It appeared that she had walked out on a dead tree that leaned over the water at the foot of the bluff, and that, just as she slipped and fell, both Ned and Mr. Plover saw her. Mr. Plover vowed that he would never forget Ned's leaping from the bluff: "Jest like one o' them guardian angels the ole girl here tells Nettie about." I was on the point of remarking that Ned would make a funny-looking guardian angel, when Nettie herself killed the words on my lips.

"No, he isn't my guardian angel, daddy," she said, her brown eyes very serious; "but my guardian angel sent him."

Mr. Plover suddenly became very busy with filling his pipe. "Yes," he said, without looking up, "I reckon he did, honey." And Mrs. Plover bent over and kissed her little girl very tenderly.

We were all silent then for a space, until Mr. Plover scraped back his chair and got up.

"Come on, boys," said he briskly, "let's go out under the trees and let the ole girl clean up a spell."

The four of us were already out of the cabin and walking towards the skirt of the woods when Mrs. Plover called her husband back to bring down the willow basket from the attic.

"Well," said Hal quickly, "what are we going to

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do about the treasure? Bottom and Webb have gone on down the river, Ned. We saw 'em while you were talking with Mr. Plover."

I suggested then that we leave as soon as we decently could. "We ought to take a little rest anyway, after that dinner," I added, for I felt as full as a stuffed sausage-skin, and a little sleepy too.

We just had time to agree to my proposal when Mr. Plover appeared in the doorway and came walking across the grass to where we were lying under a buck-eye-tree.

"You jest leave it to the ole girl," said he proudly. "She'll fix you boys up a basket what'll last you fer a while, *I* guess."

We thanked him kindly.

"There now," says he regretfully, "it's little enough we k'n do fer *you* boys. I only wisht it was more."

We lay there then in the cool shade, chatting a little but mostly listening to Mr. Plover's stories of his fishing and trapping. He made his living in this way, it appeared; and by his account the woods thereabouts must have been full of wild animals. Of course, we told him of the catamount that had attacked us, and he listened to the story as breathlessly as a boy.

"Well now, that *is* int'restin'!" said he. "They's consider'ble catamounts round here, all right; I tuk two last winter. But of a custom they don't jump humans—of a custom—without they're powerful hungry, which is mostly in the winter. But bob-cats! they's a sight o' bob-cats; and they're meaner'n cata-

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mounts too, right mean. I mind two winters ago when I was takin' one from a trap, he scratched me all up the arm, that bad the ole girl had to bind it up."

"But, Mr. Plover," said I, "how do you get to town to sell your fish and furs and buy things?" For I saw no sort of conveyance on the premises.

He gave a little laugh.

"Well, we does live purty fur fr'm civ'l'zation; you might say so. But the Brewers lives fu'ther." He jerked his pipe over his shoulder. "They lives down that way 'bout three mile; got a right nice farm too. I hires their wagon whenever I want to go to Kimley; which ain't so often, to be sure. But the ole girl an' Nettie goes wunst a month — to church — during the fine weather, that is. The Brewers, they picks 'em up down at the ford — Hunter's Ford, what you boys was askin' about. The Brewers is Cath'lic too."

Just then Mrs. Plover and Nettie came out and joined us, sitting in the grass like the rest. At first Nettie seated herself near her mother, but she kept looking and looking at Ned, I noticed, until finally she crossed over to his side. All of a sudden, when the rest of us had ceased talking for a moment, she glanced up into his face and said:

"Are you sick, Mister — Mister Ned?"

I looked at him quickly; his face did seem a trifle flushed.

Mrs. Plover dropped the sewing she had in her hands and uttered a little cry.

"Mr. Taylor, are you ill?"

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Ned laughed to reassure her.

“Why no, Mrs. Plover,” he answered. “I can’t imagine what made Nettie think so. I’m all right. I think we’d better be going, if you would let me have my clothes. We’re all ever so thankful for your kindness.” He rose to his feet, stood for a brief space with one hand on the buckeye-tree, and then, suddenly, sank down again. “I do feel a little dizzy,” he murmured.

Mrs. Plover was already bending over him, her hand on his forehead.

“The poor boy has a fever!” she cried, looking around. “He must be put to bed at once.”

I glanced at Hal. There was a curious expression on his face, but I could read it as plain as day: He was anxious on Ned’s account, but he was thinking of the treasure too.

“Oh, I’m all right,” Ned protested again, but his voice sounded shaky and weak.

Mrs. Plover turned to her husband.

“Plov, carry him in the house at once and put him on the bed.”

Mr. Plover reached down his big arms, took Ned up as he would an infant, and started towards the cabin; Mrs. Plover leading, and Nettie, Hal, and I bringing up the rear. I caught a glimpse of Ned’s face before we got to the door, and if ever a boy looked sick it was he. Hal and I remained outside while they carried him in; and presently Mr. and Mrs. Plover returned.

“I think I can cure the poor dear lad,” she assured

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us. "It's exposure and the starvation he's gone through. Then that jump from the cliff was a terrible shock, poor dear. And to top it all came the dinner. He really ate too much, I think," she added, smiling.

"And he kin eat all we've got too, Janet," interrupted Mr. Plover over her shoulder.

"Yes, of course, Plov dear; but you don't understand. Now you boys must stay with us to-night," she went on, turning again to us. "He has to have a good night's rest. And Plov, if he *should* take a turn for the worse you'll go to Kimley for the doctor."

"You jest say when, ole girl. I reckon I'll fetch that doctor here hand over fist."

"I'm going to put him to bed now," concluded Mrs. Plover. "Don't go far from the house; I may need you."

I could not but notice the change that had come over Mrs. Plover now that Ned was ill. Up to the present she had, of course, been kind and hospitable to us and full of gratitude for the saving of her child. Nevertheless, there was a suggestion of conscious reserve in her manner; for example, she had addressed us, mere striplings that we were, as Mister. Now, however, of a sudden Ned was become her "poor dear lad," and we had very properly descended to the plane of boys. Though I didn't quite understand it then, I do so now: Sickness will invariably call out the mother in a woman, and the sick one, whether old or young, becomes for the time her child.

Well, then, we three, Mr. Plover, Hal, and I strolled over to the shade again and sat down.

CHAPTER XIX

Paul Plover

“NOW I do hope the pore feller don’t get tuk bad,” said Mr. Plover, filling his pipe; “an’ him on a fishin’ trip too. I reckon, though, the ole girl’ll fix him up; she knows a thing or two. Not but what I ain’t wantin’ to go to Kimley,” he added hastily.

All of a sudden Hal sprang to his feet as though he had been sitting on a bees’ nest.

“Holy jumpin’ Jerusalem, Bert! Barnum!”

Mr. Plover must have thought that Hal too was falling sick; I know I did, for I couldn’t imagine what he meant.

“Barnum?” I echoed, wondering.

“Yes, our big fish,” he explained excitedly. “We’ve left him down in the river!”

“Oh,” said I, rather relieved. “Well, where would you have him—on dry land?”

“But the turtles!” he cried. “The turtles have got him sure by this time, if he hasn’t broken the line and got away.”

“How big is he?” asked Mr. Plover quietly, removing his pipe and blowing a cloud of smoke.

“Longer’n I am,” answered Hal.

Mr. Plover put his pipe back in his mouth.

“H’m. They hain’t a turtle in this river ’ll bother him, I reckon.”

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"Well, let's go down, anyway," said I, knowing Hal would be in a stew until we had a look at Barnum. "We must bring up our blankets and things—and that rifle! Lord, Hal, we left the rifle in the boat!"

Mr. Plover went over to the cabin to tell his wife whither we were going, and when he came back he was carrying, slung through the crook of his arm, a gun of his own.

"I jest thought I'd show you boys the best rifle ever I drawed bead with," says he proudly. "They calls this kind a pea-rifle, but it's the only one of its kind f'r me, or of any other kind fer the matter o' that. I've used 'em all, I reckon; but fer range and acc'racy I 'low they hain't none of 'em kin hold a candle to this ole muzzle-loadin' pea-rifle." He patted it tenderly as he spoke and at the end handed it to me for inspection. "Look out now, Bert," he warned. "She's hair trigger, she is."

I took the piece and looked at it curiously. It was an ancient weapon, surely, with a long barrel as thick as your wrist that must have weighed eighteen or twenty pounds. The bore was only as large as the tip of your little finger, and the stock was long and narrow, with polished brass mountings.

"She's kinda heavy, isn't she?" I ventured, returning it to him.

He laughed quietly as we resumed our walk down the trail.

"You hardly know you're carryin' it after a while," said he; and indeed, to judge by the way he had it

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hooked in the hollow of his arm, I am sure *he* didn't know he was carrying it.

When we reached the river Hal ran down into the boat and looked over the stern.

"He's here, all right," he said, very much relieved, and began to lift up the fish to show it to Mr. Plover. But there was a sudden violent flop that almost landed Hal in the water.

"Wait a moment," said Mr. Plover, setting his rifle against a tree; "they hain't no use makin' him pesky." And he went down into the boat. "That sure is a right smart fish now—and a channel, too, by gum! Did you ketch him around here?"

We told him, just up at the bend.

"I wonder now—" He paused, pulling his chin. "I wonder now ef he ain't the same rascal what broke my little hooks last week two nights runnin'. He snapped five on 'em, same's you'd snap twigs. I 'lowed he was a channel too; an' the third night I laid fer him, but he'd got enough steel in his mouth by that time, I guess. Lemme take a peep." He bent down and adroitly opened the fish's mouth. "Look! Look there now! I thought so!" he cried. Sure enough, there, stuck in the sides of the gaping red jaws, were three little points of steel that you could just barely see. "That's him all right," said Mr. Plover, dropping the fish back in the water. "You boys was sure right smart to land him, you sure was."

Well, then I told him how I had been jerked into the river and nearly drowned; and he laughed till the

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tears came to his eyes, not realizing, I suppose, what a narrow squeak for life I actually had had.

"I ketched a middlin' fair one myself last night," he said at length; "ef you boys care to see him." He walked over to the wall of the bluff, reached down and picked up a wire that was just visible running into the river. Then, as he pulled on it very carefully and with no little effort, a big black contrivance began to appear on the surface of the water some distance out. I couldn't imagine what it might be; it looked like the end of a large log; gradually, however, more and more of it showed above the surface, and I knew that it was some sort of fish-trap. Mr. Plover then laid hold of another wire, as cunningly concealed, and heaved on that until the whole of the long black frame lay near the shore, half of it above water. All of a sudden there sounded within an uproar of splashing so that the water became quite frothy.

"That's my fish-box," said he, "an a right smart piece o' work too, ef I do say it myself as shouldn't."

It was a huge affair about twelve feet long, round, and wattled with strong willow withes bellying a little at the middle and nailed at either end to large barrel-tops.

"There now," said Mr. Plover. "I don't want to pull her in no fu'ther. Them fish smashes around in shallow water an' gets mussed up consider'ble. You boys jest step in the boat an' pull alongside."

We did so, but at first, though they had ceased their frantic efforts to escape and were lying still, I could not see a single fish. After a bit, as the water cleared

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off, I began to make them out; the box was literally packed with them: catfish and stone-perch and carp and buffalo and some other kinds I had never seen before.

“Gol-lee!” cried Hal rapturously.

“I got ‘em sep’rated,” explained Mr. Plover from the bank; “cats on one side an’ scalers on the other: scalers cain’t live long with cats. Look in the right end — that’s where the cats is — an’ see ‘f you find that shovel-head.”

Just as I looked a great yellow thing, like a log, floated to the surface, the other fish dropping beneath it. It was a monster of a catfish; its head was the size of a bucket.

“He’s not as big as Barnum though,” said Hal promptly.

“No,” replied Mr. Plover with a laugh, “he ain’t so long, I reckon; but they’s consider’ble more meat on him.”

“But don’t they lose weight, Mr. Plover, if you keep them very long?” I asked, when we were on shore again, and he had rolled his box back into deep water. We were seated on a log now, facing the river, and Mr. Plover was thoughtfully drawing on his pipe, with his gun between his knees.

“Oh, they eats,” he explained. “You k’n feed ‘em. ‘Less o’ course, they’re gilled; in which case you may as well pitch ‘em back right away, or else cook ‘em at wunst. The worst thing, though, is crowdin’ ‘em. You cain’t crowd fish. I reckon I got too many in there now,” he added; “but I’m a-goin’ to Kimley,

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maybe this week, maybe next; an' they'll do, they'll do."

We fell silent then, for a while, and I grew a little sleepy, sitting there in the shade. The air was warm and drowsy and still. Save for the murmur of the river and the occasional prattle of a bird upon the hillside, there wasn't a sound. Around about us on the green bank lay a checkered pattern of light and shadow, where the afternoon sun fell aslant through the trees. And out over the margin of the river a cloud of gnats was expanding and contracting in a shaft of sunbeams.

"I wonder how Ned is doing," said Hal at length, breaking the silence.

Mr. Plover took his pipe from his mouth and patted the ashes down in the bowl.

"Oh, Ned'll be all right," says he comfortingly. "You mark my words, the ole girl'll fetch him around. Don't you worry. Why, I mind I was that sick wunst I couldn't raise my blessed arm, an' the ole girl had me on my feet inside a week: it was winter too, an' Nettie was a baby. . . . Bless my heart, but that ole girl's a trump! Ef you knowed her as I knows her you'd say likewise an' amen too. Why boys, I ain't worth her one little bit; I ain't worth the ground she walks on."

His voice had suddenly become very tender; he spoke lower now, without looking at either of us.

"I mind when I first met her; she lived on a farm 'bove Kimley, an' I was trappin' 'n' fishin' in them days, same as allus. She was the purtiest little maid

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then, with her brown hair an' her smilin' brown eyes — not but what she ain't purty still, as you may see. I calls her ole girl, but she hain't old, not by a long shot; though her hands, what I ain't worthy to tech, is a bit roughened up with work.” All this Mr. Plover threw in hastily as a long parenthesis. He took a few pulls on his pipe then, reminiscently.

“Well sir, I went a-wooin’ of her, an’ she said Yes. ‘Plov dear,’ says she—she called me ‘Plov dear’ from the first an’ still so names me, as you may have noted—‘Plov dear,’ says she, ‘I’m yourn. Take me where you live. I’ll be true to you allus,’ says she. And her come of rich farmer folks, too, ‘n’ havin’ an eddication, ‘n’ playin’ the pianny, ‘n’ courted by all the young fellers in the country-side. But her ole man, he couldn’t see me f’r tall timber, not him. So one night we slips off, me ‘n’ her, an’ goes to Kimley an’ was married by the priest. ‘Plov dear,’ says she, ‘I’m a Cath’lic, you know. We must be married by the priest,’ says she. ‘An’ all our children is to be Cath’lics too!’ I didn’t make no objections to that; all I wanted was her.”

He paused for a moment, and I stole a glance at him sideways. There was a little smile about the corner of his mouth; and his half-closed eyes were looking, not at the pipe in his hand, but back into this treasured past.

“Well sir, married we was then, come this August fourteen year ago. An’ when her ole man found out he riled up and shuk her off without a penny. So I settled down to be a reg’ler farmer like her dad,

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thinkin' he might ease up a peg, and knowin' too she wouldn't want to live her days as a trapper's wife. But I didn't have no luck. First thing, the river ups and washes my crops clean out. Well, I tries once more, an' next year up sweeps the river again. 'Ole girl,' says I, 'I ain't fit fer a farmer. I ain't fit f'r nothin' 'cep' river life—fishin' 'n' trappin'. Will you resk it with me?' says I. 'Plov dear,' she says, 'I married you fer keeps, didn't I? fer keeps it is then, go where you will.' My heart give a gre't jump o' joy when I heard her say them words, fer I knowed she loved me true. An' besides, I was a-hungerin', like, fer my traps an' my hooks. Well then, I ups and sells my bit o' ground an' come a-heelin' straight down here. We lives in a tent first, till I built our cabin an' got things settled. An' then, on Christmas Eve o' that year, Nettie comes; an' my heart was plum' full. 'Plov dear,' says the ole girl, lookin' up at me an' then down at Nettie, 'n' smilin' like, 'Gawd's give us a Christmas present.'"

He broke off then for a space, gazing out on the river. And when he spoke again there was a note of wistfulness in his voice that was doubly pathetic, coming as it did from a such a big strong man.

"An' there she is, up there on the hill," he continued, "workin' an' drudgin', come fair come foul, her what knowed fine dresses 'n' parties 'n' books 'n' piannies 'n' sechlike—O Gawd, ef I could only bring her back to them things! Ef I could only give her a little taste of somethin' better, somethin' what she was used to b'fore I come acrost her path. But I

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ain't had no luck — allus the river, I reckon. . . .
allus jest the river."

Well, as you may suppose, Hal and I didn't attempt to comfort him. We couldn't. We were mere boys; what could we say to assuage the sorrow of this great rugged man, simple and confiding though he was? So we sat there in silence, the three of us, looking out upon the river.

CHAPTER XX

We Sleep Between Sheets

FTER a while I noticed that the patches of light around us on the bank had disappeared: the sun had dropped behind the bluff above us.

Presently Mr. Plover knocked his pipe against the log, thrust it into his pocket, and stood up.

“Come, boys,” he said briskly, “let’s be a-goin’ up to the cabin. It’s gettin’ on to supper-time, I reckon. Give me them blankets. There now, you got everything?”

He had resumed his ordinary cheerful mood and, as we walked up the trail, chatted on very merrily, now and then emphasizing his opinion that Ned would be “as fit as a fiddle by mornin’.”

We had just got to the foot of the earthen stair in the side of the ravine when a sudden sweet voice, as clear as a bell, began to sing somewhere above us on the plateau. Mr. Plover grasped my arm.

“Listen,” said he softly; “that’s her now a-singin’! Hain’t she a warbler! Listen!” And while he cocked his head a little to catch the song he kept looking at me, his eyes beaming with pride.

“O all the hills are green, love,
And all the skies are blue.
O but it’s bonny weather, love.
For me and you.”

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The last few notes sounded as low and liquid as running water; I think it was the sweetest singing I have ever heard. I stood up on tip-toe, looking over the edge of the ravine, to catch a glimpse, if possible, of the singer; but all I could see were the tops of trees, at the other end of the glade, shining rosily in the evening sun. And then, as I turned to Mr. Plover, the voice began a second stanza.

“But when the hills are bleak, love,
And the skies no longer blue,
If you shall question then, love,
You’ll find me true,—
Still, still, true.”

Again there was that soft lingering on the final words; like the low notes of a dove.

“Gee,” said Hal, “that’s pretty!”

“Hain’t it!” cried Mr. Plover, and started up the steps. When we reached the top, there was Mrs. Plover out in front of the hollyhock beds, gathering up some pieces of linen that lay strewn on the grass. She started up when she saw us and came down the path.

“We heard you a-singin’, ole girl,” said Mr. Plover enthusiastically. “That voice o’ yourn beats the birds all holler. Why, I didn’t tell you now,” he added, turning to us, “that she writ them words herself!”

Mrs. Plover laughed a happy laugh, and blushed a little too, I think.

“Plov!” she remonstrated; “you’re a regular boy!” And then, in a different tone, “Ned’s doing nicely,” she went on. “He’s resting more easily now, poor

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boy. Nettie's in the room with him; she wanted to nurse him, she said. I've washed his clothes so he'll have something clean to put on in the morning. He'll be all right then, after a good night's sleep. But Plov, you and the boys will have to put up in the kitchen. I'll get those two straw ticks down after supper."

We had arrived at the cabin by this time, and as we went around to the kitchen, I peered in at the window and saw Nettie sitting at the bedside and Ned, with his face turned to the wall, sleeping soundly.

Shortly then, after Mr. Plover had milked the cow and done some other chores in which he would by no means allow us to assist him, supper was announced, and we all went in and sat down. Mrs. Plover wouldn't suffer us to talk much for fear of disturbing Ned. (He was having it rather soft, I thought.) But if we didn't talk, we ate; at least I did, with just as much of an appetite as at dinner.

"Now, ole girl," said Mr. Plover, laying down his knife and fork and getting quietly (and awkwardly) to his feet, "when you get the dishes cleaned up, you jest call me an' I'll fetch them ticks down. An' make a pallet fer yourself in the other room too, 'cause I'm a-goin' to do the settin' up."

"Indeed you're not," flashed out his wife, forgetting her own injunction of silence. "What do you know about nursing a sick boy? You're going to sleep right here and not come bothering around at all."

"Well," he replied, "I don't know about med'cine and sech things, but I could call you, couldn't I, when I needed 'em?"

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Well, in the end they compromised by dividing the night-watch between them, Mr. Plover taking the first half.

When Mrs. Plover at length had prepared our bed in the kitchen, I was willing enough to turn in, for I was dead tired. The sky was still bright, I remember, when we went inside and found our mattress on the floor with snowy sheets and pillows and our own blankets at the foot of it. It was a great comfort, as you may imagine, to take off our clothes and sleep once more like civilized human beings; those fresh white sheets felt like velvet.

I turned over, stretched my legs luxuriously, and snuggled my head into the clean-smelling pillow. Just then, Hal, who was sitting on the other side of the mattress and taking off his stockings, gave a kind of sigh and said:

“Gee, Bert, it’s too bad we haven’t got our line out!”

If I hadn’t been already half asleep I believe I would have thrown my shoe at him. As it was, I could only murmur, “You’d run it yourself then;” and the next moment I was in the land of Nod.

I was awakened the following morning by the odor and sizzle of frying bacon; and looking up, I saw Mrs. Plover at the stove. It was broad day; the door, which faced the east, was shut (for my sake, I supposed), but I could see the sunlight lying beneath it. Hal was nowhere in sight, nor Mr. Plover: I was apparently the only slug-a-bed in the house.

“Good-morning, Mrs. Plover,” said I, somewhat

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abashed. "I hope I haven't been in your way here."

She turned with a little start, but seeing me, smiled brightly.

"Good-morning," said she, quite merrily. "You're not in my way in the least. I didn't want to wake you, you were sleeping so sound, but I simply had to get breakfast. Oh yes," she went on, answering my look, "little Hal and Plov have been up long ago. He took Hal with him to run his lines. And Ned is well again — isn't that fine! He and Nettie said they were going out to get the eggs, but they've been gone ever so long. I suppose Nettie's showing him her little shrine down in the woods that she built with her own hands for Our Lady." She turned again to the stove. "Just wrap that blanket around you and go in the other room and dress; I brought your clothes in there. Hurry now; it's way after six, and Plov'll be back any minute."

As I was buttoning up my shirt in the front room, I looked out the open window and espied Ned and Nettie up at the far end of the glade near the margin of the woods. Ned was carrying a basket (the eggs, I supposed), and Nettie, at his side, had her arms full of wild flowers. They seemed very gay and merry as they walked together across the bright sunlit grass still sparkling with the morning dew. Nettie was running on in the liveliest manner, every now and then holding the flowers against her breast with one hand while with the other she pointed out some spot that was of especial interest in her little life. It was very

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pretty, I thought, to see them there against the green background of the trees.

I was dressed now and going out to meet them when, opening the front door, I saw Hal and Mr. Plover coming up the path from the ravine.

So soon as Hal caught sight of me, "Hey, Bert!" he cried, "you ought to see the fish Mr. Plover caught! Seven beauts! not one of 'em under five pounds and all channels too! Gee, Mr. Plover knows how to fish! don't you, Mr. Plover? Why, he said beforehand he'd probably catch channels this morning!"

Mr. Plover grinned broadly.

"You're a keen little feller fer fishin', ain't you, Hal?" said he. "I never see your beat yet. I wisht to goodness now I could show you some *real* fishin', that I do. You an' me 'ud have a time of it, wouldn't we, Hal?" He chuckled at the thought, looking down at Hal with kindly, affectionate eyes.

I was about to say that perhaps we might all go on a camping trip together sometime, when Mrs. Plover called us in to breakfast. At the table Ned proved to all, even to Mrs. Plover, that he was quite recovered; and although Hal and I were not under the necessity of establishing such a proof, we fell to, heartily enough, on the bacon and biscuits and oatmeal porridge.

Then, when breakfast was over, and we had declared our intention of putting off once more down the river, Mrs. Plover, seeing it was futile to press us to stay longer, ordered her husband to shoulder the big willow hamper she had prepared for us. "For I'm

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going with you as far as I can to see you off," said she, putting on her sunbonnet.

"An' right you was, ole girl," said Mr. Plover, taking up the basket. And with that we all started down towards the river.

Well, you are to suppose there were a great many good-byes and good wishes passed between us; and, I am sure, on both sides there was something of sorrow too. Little Nettie especially showed her regret at our going; the tears stood big in her brown eyes; and, as I turned to look back for the last time, she was standing on the river bank, one hand holding her mother's skirts and the other waving us farewell.

"Now," said Mr. Plover, when the three of us were seated in the boat, "you got ever'thing, have you? You ain't goin' off an' leavin' nothin' behind?"

We assured him with thanks that we had forgot nothing.

"I filled your lantern too; that was mostly water you had. And mind you, Hal," he added, his eyes lighting with a smile, "you keep a sharp eye on Barnum, or he'll be gettin' away from you yet."

We were some little distance from shore when it suddenly dawned on me that we *were* forgetting something — a very important bit of information.

"Mr. Plover," I called back, "(Stop rowing a minute, Ned.) Can you tell us exactly where Hunter's Ford is?"

He stepped to the water's edge and pointed downstream.

"You see that hill way down yonder where the

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river turns? Well, jest at the other end o' that hill. They's a big gravel-bar there, an' the ford comes out on it. You cain't miss her; the road cuts in between that hill an' the next one."

"Thank you," I answered. "Good-bye. Good-bye, Mrs. Plover and Nettie."

"Good-bye," they called, waving their hands. And Mrs. Plover added, "God bless you and keep you, boys."

God keep us indeed! We needed His keeping in the desperate and tragic acts that were to follow.

CHAPTER XXI

We Plan to Spy Upon the Enemy

“**N**OW, fellows,” said Ned, when we had got on a short way, “what we have to do, I guess, is just keep on going till we hit some trace of Jerry Bottom and Buck Webb. We’ve got to watch pretty closely too; they’ll be trying to give us the slip, I think, for I shouldn’t wonder but they suspect we know something about the treasure.”

“Well,” said I, “if there’s any connection between Hunter’s Ford and Hunter’s Hill, we haven’t got much farther to go. But then, even if we do spot Bottom and Webb, it’ll be up to us to find Hunter’s Hill some way or other; we’ll not know for sure if they’re even near it.”

“We’ll spy on ‘em then!” said Ned, his eyes kindling at the daring thought. “We’ll sneak up on their camp and listen to their talk!”

“Gee!” said Hal; and for a while we were silent, pondering this bold and perilous measure.

We were now approaching the bend of the river, and before us towered the hill Mr. Plover had pointed out, its enormous bulk, shaped like the back of an elephant, far overtopping all the neighboring hills. Sloping quite to the water’s edge, it extended along the river for almost half a mile. Its precipitous side was densely wooded with many varieties of trees, so

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that it assumed the appearance of a gigantic wall of solid greenery. There was but one bluff throughout its whole length, and this was directly in front of us: a high face of rock, fringed at the top by overhanging shrubbery and dropping straight for nearly three hundred feet. Beneath it, at the margin of the river, the white sandstone was worn, by the action of flood-water, into huge irregular steps up which you might climb a little distance.

From the highest of these steps there was an abrupt rise which appeared to terminate at the lip of a rather wide ledge. I say wide, for, although I was viewing it from a good stone's cast up the river, I could not see its farther side where it met the base of the cliff proper. It was an apparently inaccessible shelf, being too high to reach from below; and I was just wondering how we might get at it when a cry from Hal in the bow of the boat drove all thought of it from my mind.

"Look there!" he exclaimed, pointing downstream. "There's the bar all right!"

Sure enough, far down at the other end of the hill lay the long stretch of gravel that Mr. Plover had told us of. Beyond it, deflecting slightly to the right, the river sparkled in a rapids; and above the rapids bulked another hill.

"Hurrah!" cried Ned, lying on his oars and looking over his shoulder. "The treasure's within striking distance now! Either this is Hunter's Hill or the one down below."

"Don't you be too sure of that," cautioned Hal. "Neither of 'em's Hunter's Hill most likely."

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"Well, we won't be long finding out," Ned replied. "Soon as we see Jerry Bottom — hello!" he broke off, "what's that smoke hanging over the trees down there below the bar? Any money it's Bottom! Now look here, here's what we'll do. We'll just coast on down quite unconcerned till we reach the upper end of the bar. Then we'll land on the opposite bank, just as if we were going to camp there. Once on shore and a fire built just to fool 'em, we can scout down along the river and see if we can catch any sight of them on the other side. It'll be easy too; we can't mistake that blue boat of theirs with its red rim."

Well, this seemed a pretty sensible plan, so we continued on our course till we got very nearly to the head of the gravel-bar. Here the current became somewhat swifter, though the river was still fairly wide; and I accordingly judged that we were in shallow water and somewhere near the ford. The big hill on our right fell off abruptly into a kind of gorge, full of great trees and thick-growing underbrush, on the other side of which rose up the second hill.

Hugging the left-hand bank, which was high and steep, we drifted along with our eyes on the alert for the road that must here run into the river. The shore above us was wooded and wild enough, with all the rank undergrowth of bottom-land. Tall horseweeds stood up like spears between the dense trees, and vines of fox-grape swung in long festoons from branch to branch, sometimes even hanging out over the water so that we must put them aside as we passed along.

After a while Hal, who was sitting on the bow

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thwart, uttered an exclamation and told Ned to pull on his left. And then, almost before I knew it, the prow was resting in the middle of a wheel-rutted road. It seemed rather startling, amid such wild surroundings, to have this workaday piece of civilization thrust thus suddenly upon us.

"Well," said Ned, "here's Hunter's Ford at all events. I wonder if you can see the road on the other side. Yep, there she is. Look there, straight across; she runs up into those woods like a path."

Hal had already stepped out of the boat and was standing with the painter in his hand.

"Come on. We're going to land, aren't we?" said he.

Ned and I got out, and the three of us walked up the road a little way for a likely spot to pitch our pretended camp: pretended, because we weren't sure yet whether we would remain or not; and it was our purpose to deceive Bottom and Webb.

The road struck sharply up from the river to our left through a natural cut in the high bank; overhead the arching trees with their pleached branches formed a closely woven roof, so that we were walking through a veritable tunnel of green. In a moment or two we reached the top of the slope and came out on a level tract of land riotous with verdant vegetation. Hither we determined to fetch our belongings and make a fire.

"You fellows bring up the things," said Ned; "and I'll scout down the river a piece and see if I can't catch a glimpse of Bottom and Webb."

Well, Hal and I set to work then to unload the boat;

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or rather, to be more accurate, I set to work, for Hal spent the time fussing with Barnum's line in a vain endeavor to make it more secure.

"We don't want to lose old Barnum," he explained.

"Well," said I, "I've carried everything up now. You can at least get some wood while I start the fire."

But I had scarce got a blaze kindled when Ned bursts out of the wood on the other side of the road.

"That's them all right, that's them!" he cried excitedly.

"Did you see 'em?" I asked.

"No," he replied, "but I saw their boat — the blue one with the red rim. They've got it pulled on shore among a lot of bushes, trying to hide it; but I saw its stern as plain as day. They're camping just above it at the foot of the hill; you can see the smoke going up over the willow-trees."

"Well," said I, "what we've got to do is to hold a council of war. We've got to sit down right now and plan what we're going to do." And suiting action to word, I seated myself at the base of a shagbark and continued. "Over there is the enemy, and here are we. We're both after the treasure; but with this difference: they know where it is, and we don't."

"They don't know either," Hal struck in; "they've got to find the triple-blazed oak first."

"True enough, but they know where Hunter's Hill is, and we don't. And that's the biggest difference in the world. Now my plan's this. You remember that high bluff we passed up at the turn of the river? Well, there's a ledge on that bluff that would make a peach

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of a hiding-place, if we can only get to it. It's just about nine o'clock now; we've got plenty of time to explore that ledge. We'll let on we're looking for a good place to fish, and take our time rowing up the river. If it's necessary, we can even put in a line."

"O' course we'll put in a line," Hal interrupted, but I went right on, ignoring him.

"Then we'll come back and loaf around till night-fall. The moon won't rise till after ten; that'll give us two good hours of darkness. Soon as it gets right dark one of us will cross the river, sneak up on their camp and try to find out where Hunter's Hill is. The other two will row quietly up to the bluff, take our things up on the ledge, and then sink the boat with rocks. Next morning Bottom and Webb'll think we've disappeared off the face of the earth; there won't be a sign of us left. They'll never be able to find us on that ledge."

I paused and looked at Ned triumphantly; even he, I considered, couldn't improve on that plan.

"Well, that *is* a good scheme, Bert," he admitted at length. "Only I wouldn't say, Go to the ledge to-night. I wouldn't go there at all if we could help it. If we disappear *too* suddenly, then they *will* know something's up. Let's stay right here as long as we can, letting on we're just camping and fishing same as we were up the river. We'll be free then to explore Hunter's Hill as much as we like, providing we don't let 'em see us over there too often."

"And providing that's Hunter's Hill," interjected Hal.

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"Of course, providing that too," assented Ned. "So I'd say," he resumed, "that we stay right here. Now, in case anything does happen to-night — say they found out we were spying on 'em — let's have everything stowed in the boat, ready to cut for the ledge."

"And leave the one spying to take care of himself!" I protested.

"Well," said Ned, "what else can we do? Besides, he'll know where the ledge is and will make it there pretty close after the boat."

When he had discussed the matter a little longer we agreed finally on this arrangement, and, the morning being still young, Ned proposed that we cut some fishing-poles for a blind and row up the river to the bluff. "For," said he, "we may discover that we can't get on the ledge after all; then we'll have to change our plans, and we'll have the whole afternoon to figure 'em out."

So Ned and I broke down six long paw-paw stalks while Hal detached Barnum from the boat's end and secured him further up the river, tying the line to a root that an elephant couldn't have budged. Then the three of us got aboard and started leisurely upstream.

All this while I had myself seen nothing of Bottom and Webb, except the white mist of their campfire smoke; and now even this had disappeared. They might have been in Siberia or Timbuctoo for any glimpse I had of them. For this reason, perhaps, I found myself not only regarding our whole adventure with much less anxiety than formerly but even enjoying it. The strange forebodings which I had ex-

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perienced two nights ago had now ceased to trouble me. Somehow or other I felt in my bones that, however hazardous the business might be, we should have the top of it. Perhaps it was the warm sunshine and the bright water and the green woods that put me in this mood; perhaps it was our delightful stay at Paul Plover's; or perhaps, as I say, it was because our enemies had so completely withdrawn from sight and seemed no longer suspicious of our presence. At all events I was alert and eager for the enterprise in hand and entertained not a doubt of its successful issue. Whether my happy presentiment was to be verified the succeeding pages of this narrative will, I trust, amply show.

Gradually, as we neared the bend, I who was at the oars edged the boat in towards the cliff. Before we landed, however, we scanned the river up and down; but not a soul was in sight: only the long shining surface of water, with here and there a bird skimming above it and flashing in the sunlight. I grounded the boat on the lower side of the cliff, and the three of us got ashore.

We made our way out on the horizontal erosions which I have called steps, but which indeed were anything but steps. Each of them was pretty steep and sloped off so abruptly into the next that it was only with some difficulty that we finally reached the base of the ledge: and here our progress was effectually blocked. For ten feet perhaps the rock stood straight up like a wall, so that there was not the least chance of our gaining the top of it from below.

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"Well," said Ned, "let's see if we can't get to it from the side, up there on the hill."

"I don't think we can," said I; "it ends before it touches the hill."

Sure enough, after we had ascended a little distance through the trees and bushes alongside the bluff, we saw not a sign of a ledge; there was only the moss-tufted perpendicular of the rock standing out from the hill and dropping sheer to the ground all the way down to the edge of the river.

"Wait!" cried Hal suddenly. "I've got an idea!" He ran over to an ash-tree that grew near the bluff and, putting his arms about the trunk, "Here you fellows, give me a boost," he called.

I guessed his purpose before he had thrown a leg through the first crotch. It was a large ash he had shinned, with branches running out in front of the cliff; it was just possible that we might reach the ledge by this route.

"Hey, I've got her!" he cried, and as we looked up at him he went out among the leaves as nimbly as a squirrel. Although I understood what he was about, I confess my breath came short when, the limb bending under his weight, I saw him disappear beyond the shoulder of the cliff. At the same moment back swung the limb again, and Hal's voice sounded triumphantly:

"Easy as pie! Come on, you fellows! This is a bird of a place!"

Well, Ned and I were not to be outdone, and so, mustering our courage, up the tree we went and out over the limb that Hal had followed. Though at first

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it looked like a very daring feat, it was in fact quite safe. The limb swayed down to within a few yards of the ledge, so that, hanging by our hands, we had only a short space to drop.

“Gee!” said Ned, looking around, “you couldn’t want a better place to hide.”

CHAPTER XXII

My Night Adventure

IT was in truth an ideal spot for concealment. At both ends the ledge, which was as level as pavement and some five yards wide in the middle, tailed off into the steep wall of the precipice. When lying down or even sitting we were quite invisible to any person on the river, and a view of us from either side was obstructed by the outstanding wings of the bluff. The only way we could possibly be discovered was from above; and the odds were against anyone's approaching near enough to the brow of the cliff to peer directly below.

"That's all fine," said Hal, "but look at our branch; it's a mile in the air. How're we going to get off o' here?"

But getting off was as easy as getting on — easier even. First we let Hal down over the ledge till his feet almost touched the topmost slope; he slid a little then, but made the rest of the way safely. Next Ned dropped over, and I, lying flat on the rock, held him by the hands as he and I had held Hal. Last of all I went, and as I let myself fall Ned caught me and steadied me.

"But how're we going to get all those things up there?" asked Hal as we started down the river again. "We can't carry that basket over the limb."

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"Shucks," said Ned, "that's easy. Haul her up with a piece of the trot-line."

"Geewhilikins," Hal complained, "we won't have any trot-line left at all after a while. Bert's already cut off a big piece."

"And look what I got with it," said I.

"Besides," added Ned, "most probably we won't have to go up there after all. Most probably everything'll come off smooth to-night. Remember, we're going to the ledge only in case of necessity."

Hal seemed satisfied with this, but after a while he spoke again, putting a question that was very pertinent indeed.

"Who's going to do the spyin'?" he asked.

"Huh?" grunted Ned, pulling on the oars.

"Who's going to do the spyin'?"

Ned stopped in mid-stroke.

"Gee, yes! I forgot that. Well, we'll draw straws for it, I guess, soon's we get back to camp."

We were pretty near camp then, and I had my eyes out for a sight of our enemies; but I could see nothing of them, not even their smoke.

Well, the rest of the day went off quite uneventfully, except perhaps that the task of eavesdropping fell to my lot; which for me was eventful enough, at least in its results, as you shall hear. After making an excellent meal, and a large inroad, on Mrs. Plover's hamper, we lay beneath the trees for a long time, resting and talking now about the treasure and now about our stay with the Plovers. I told Ned what Mr. Plover had related of his life, and he vowed that when

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he got enough money he would do something handsome for the poor fellow. "It's a shame," said he, "that people like them have to live way out here in the wilderness. Soon as I make my pile I'm going to take them out of these backwoods and set them up in life." I said that at that rate they would likely remain just where they were; which nettled Ned a trifle, I think, for he didn't say anything in return.

After a space, then, at Hal's suggestion, Ned and I set out the line, while he himself went off on his mysterious mission for worms. Ned had protested he didn't see any use in worms, as our fishing was only a blind. But Hal declared that fishing was fishing, and that if we were going to put in a line we ought to put it in properly: and that meant bait it. Well, after the line was duly baited, which was along towards sundown, we ate supper and then made up our belongings into bundles so that we might carry them more easily to the boat; if, indeed, it should be necessary to seek our hiding-place.

At length the sun sank below the horizon of hills, and we waited nervously for the lingering twilight to melt into darkness. It seemed to me that the night would never come; for, though I knew I was going on an extremely perilous errand, I had screwed myself up to it and was in a sweat to be off.

Meantime we built a great fire so that our enemies might know we were tarrying in the same place and not be led to suspect us. They themselves were late in building theirs — they had probably been out all day, searching for the triple-blazed oak — and, as the dark-

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ness closed in, we began to fear that they had decamped. At length, however, there appeared a tiny bright glow among the trees on the other shore, and we knew that they had returned.

“Now’s the time,” said I.

“No,” said Hal, “wait a bit. Let ’em cook supper and get to talking.”

A quarter of an hour later, after rehearsing our plan once more with Ned and Hal, I set out at last. I walked down the road to the ford, intending to wade the river. This was rather dangerous, I knew, for even in a moonless night the starshine renders objects fairly visible on water; but I was determined to run the risk, as in this way I should have dry clothes when I arrived at the other side. But fortune favored me at the start; when I reached the border of the river and looked up, not a star was to be seen. An obscuring veil of cloud covered the entire heavens; so dark was everything indeed that I could scarcely discern the treetops on the opposite shore.

Hastily doffing my clothes, I rolled them into a bundle and stepped into the river. I made my way over very easily, the water hardly getting above my waist. Once on the bar, I didn’t pause to dress but hurried, gingerly enough, across the stretch of gravel to the black shelter of the woods. Here I put on my clothes again, and then cast about me for the safest way to sneak upon the enemy. Their campfire was downstream perhaps a hundred yards (I had seen it clearly from the ford) and just at the foot of the hill not half a stone’s cast from the river. I thought it

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best to advance as far as I could along the sandy margin of the bar and then to go up through the trees so that I might come down on them from above; I did not wish to put the river at my back and thus have my way of escape cut off. But this method of approach cost me very dear, as you shall presently see.

I made the end of the gravel-bar without mishap, and then began very cautiously to work my way cater-cornered up the hill. My progress was slow, for it was so dark under the trees that I must feel my footing at every step. I had now lost direct sight of the fire, but I could see its ruddy light reflected on the leaves beneath me. Our enemies were evidently camping at the foot of some sort of dip or sharp declivity near the base of the hill; and this was the reason I was no longer able to perceive their fire.

I continued on my way very warily until I was almost abreast of the camp, though by this time a considerable distance up the hill. Then I began my descent, aiming to reach a point just above the fire whence, by worming myself forward, I should at last be near enough to overhear the conversation. But I had not taken two steps when, my foot slipping, a small stone dislodged and rolled a short way down the hillside. It could not have made much noise, but to my ears it was like the crash of a landslide. With my heart in my mouth I crouched behind a tree and waited. For five minutes perhaps I remained there, my ears pricked for the merest sound. But I heard nothing.

Once more then I resumed my descent, and this

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time all went well. I was approaching very near now; the firelight among the trees was growing brighter and larger. Suddenly, as I crept around the big-bellied bole of a sycamore, I saw the tops of flames and, silhouetted against them, the rim of the bank under which the two treasure-hunters were camping. The bank must have been some half a dozen feet high, to judge by the fire, and I thought if I could get close to the edge of it I should have safe vantage-ground for my eavesdropping.

Stealthily I worked my way nearer and yet nearer, advancing diagonally down the hill until I had gained a point about ten yards distant from the top of the sudden drop. Here I paused. I could see the position of the camp pretty well now. They had certainly pitched upon a likely spot. It was as if nature had dug out a neat circle back into the hill, of a diameter of some twenty feet. The escarpment all around was cut so steep that the fire in the center lighted the enclosed area like an electric arc. From where I lay I could see the leafy roof of a lean-to which they had erected against the right side of the surrounding bank, and beyond the fire a blackened coffee-pot and a couple of dirty pans—the remains of their supper, I supposed.

But as I still hesitated, craning my neck, a fearing wonder began to lay hold on me: I had detected thus far not the slightest sound of a human voice! Was it possible that they had foreseen our move and were now lying in wait somewhere in the woods behind me? My heart stood still at the bare thought!

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Recovering myself then, I determined at all events to see whether they were in the camp. Softly I crept forward till I commanded a view of the whole spot save a few yards just below the bank. Beneath the lean-to was a pile of dry leaves for bedding and two rumpled blankets. Some clothing lay beside the blankets, and a number of packages strewed the ground: evidently our enemies were careless of their stores.

But this was all I could see. Bottom and Webb had apparently gone up on the hill again, if they were not lurking somewhere in ambush. Or perhaps they had already discovered the treasure and at this very moment were busy unearthing it under cover of the dark. Convinced that this latter was the case, I was about to withdraw when all of a sudden a great guffaw of laughter rocked the night, and I heard the words, bel低ed in Jerry Bottom's stentorian voice:

"High — low — jack — *and* game! Buck, did these blessed ears o' mine hear you talkin' of seven-up! Pass the bottle on that, Buck lad!"

CHAPTER XXIII

My Night Adventure—*Continued*

I KNELT there quite paralyzed with fear. The laugh seemed to rise from the earth beneath me, and had I not recognized, in the words that followed it, the voice of Jerry Bottom, I should have believed the spot was haunted and that a jovial ghost was enjoying his own joke in the heart of the hill. As it was, for the first few seconds I could not tell whence the voice had come; and then, all in a flash, I understood.

The two of them were not ten feet away, just below me at the foot of the bank! Still, even if they should stand up, I was fairly screened from view, for I was lying behind a cluster of buckberry bushes.

“Ah,” said Bottom’s voice again, “that stuff do do a man’s heart good — when took temp’rately, to be sure, as I allus say.”

“Temp’rately!” growled the other scornfully. “That’s what you allus say! Why, drot yer hide, ain’t I see you that fur gone, even when a boy, that you warn’t knowin’ of yer own mother? But temp’rately, you says! I reckon this here wild-goose chase is temp’rate too, hain’t it?”

“Now looky here, Buck,” answered Bottom in a conciliating tone, “don’t you go a-gittin’ riled ’cause I beat you at seven-up. What’s two-bits, I’d like to

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know, with a fort'n' o' gold stacked up somewhere in these here hills? An' as to wild-goose chases, who'll be the loser, I wonder, if it *is* a wild-goose chase? me as killed four men in the chasin' er you that goes back peace'bly to Kimley? But it ain't a wild-goose chase, I says, an' you knows it. Would a man turn liar an' him a-fetchin' of his last breath this side o' Judgment Seat? Not him, says you, an' right you was! If ever I heard a man speakin' the straight-line truth it was him what I hauls out o' the Osage fifteen year ago this very month; more dead'n alive he was too. Leastways he on'y lives long enough to hand me that thar' cipher. 'Pardner,' says he, 'you saved my life, leastways what thar' is of it. I'm not long fer this world,' says he. 'I'll cash in d'rectly now. This here fever's a-poundin' the brains out o' me. But b'fore I go — here, take this. Hit means gold, man! gold, gold, gold!' an' he went off a-ravin' an'so died. Now was that thar' man a-lyin'? No, says you, he warn't; an' no, I says. Pass the bottle, Buck; my whistle's dry. Temp'rately, temp'rately, lad. . . . So, ah!"

"But grantin' all that," objected Webb again, this time not so angrily (owing to the whiskey perhaps), "grantin' he was a-tellin' the truth, how does we know this here's Hunter's Hill? All I say is, yonder's Hunter's Ford. But you're only guessin' about Hunter's Hill. Besides, we been a-wearin' shoe leather out on these rocks fer two whole days, an' ain't see a ghost of a blazed tree. Hit looks oncommon funny, it does."

"Now thar' you're talkin' sense," answered Bot-

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tom, "thar' you're flashin' a spark er two o' the ole Buck Webb o' my boyhood days — happy innocent days they was too, as I'll never see again." (Here the hypocritical old knave heaved a great sigh.) . . . "Wal, this here's Hunter's Ford, says you; but this here *hain't* Hunter's Hill, you says. Right you was Buck, ole pard, this ain't Hunter's Hill. Over yonder's Hunter's Hill, what we should 'a' hexplored first. How does I know that, says you? I knows that 'cause I been over this whole State, an' thar' ain't another thing called Hunter inside its blessed bound'ries, 'cept a pigsty of a burg up on the Wabash what ain't nowheres near a hill. Not but what I ain't ready to foller yer advice, Buck. You allus did have a right smart head on yer shoulders. Why, looky now, if I hadn't run across you in Kimley, where'd you an' me be now? You'd be still a-blastin' the blessed rock, you'd be. An' I'd prob'ly have that double-dealin' Crawford saddled on me yet, an' him a-knowin' of the cipher too an' ready to cut any minute soon's he got wind o' Hunter's Hill. But I 'low he won't do much cuttin' now, will he, Buck?" And the monster gave a chuckle that made my blood run cold.

I had now got all the information I wanted and was eager to be off. But I was afraid to budge an inch until they should begin talking again; and they remained silent for a considerable while. So I lay there, hearing my own heart beat and wondering that the sound of it did not betray me. Once some sort of insect crawled up on my neck, and its ticklish feel nearly

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sent me into spasms. But I dug my nails into the soil, set my jaws, and got my nerves under control.

At length Bottom's voice broke the silence by requesting another pull at the bottle. Here was my chance, and I began to crawfish up the hill. But I had not stirred half a foot when his next words brought me to a hearkening halt.

"I shouldn't wonder now if them kids over yonder was up to somethin'." Here he uttered a frightful oath. "I'll wring their blessed necks if they comes mixin' in this business."

"But you said you pumped 'em dry up the river," said Webb.

At this point, in my eagerness to catch every syllable, I moved forward slightly. In the act my hand dislodged a pebble that popped from its bed and rolled over the brink of the bank. I heard it plump sharply upon a box below.

"Hullo!" cried Bottom, "what's that?"

I was just on the verge of springing to my feet and bolting. If I had done so, I could have made my escape easily. But thinking that I might yet get away unobserved, I flattened myself against the ground, scarce daring to draw breath.

"Fetch my pistol, Buck, an' that thar' box o' cat-terdges in my coat," said Bottom. "Blow me if I don't have a shot up that hill."

Here was imminent danger indeed! I should have taken to my heels at once; but somehow or other my strength seemed suddenly to have failed me. I could only lie there quaking, with my heart in my shoes. I

MY NIGHT ADVENTURE — Continued

saw Webb go over to the lean-to, rummage among the clothes, and bring back a huge revolver and a box of cartridges. These he dropped on the card-table (or whatever the tell-tale pebble had struck), and I could hear Bottom spill out the bullets, muttering and cursing to himself.

“Thar’ now,” said he at length, “I reckon this here Colt’ll smoke out that ’possum.”

The next moment I was looking through the buck-berry stems directly into Jerry Bottom’s great flushed face. Then something long and black and shiny swung up before my eyes; there was a flash of fire and an ear-shattering report. With a frightened cry I leaped to my feet and bounded off up the hillside, taking a diagonal course down the river.

“A ’possum, sure enough, by — !” cried Bottom, and let fly at me once more with that cannon of his, the bullet clipping through the leaves just over my head. “Come on, Buck! after him, lad!”

I had the start of them by only twenty yards or so, for even as he fired the second shot Bottom had cleared the bank and was racing in pursuit. I could hear them behind me now crashing up through the under-brush and swearing all the oaths of hell. I tore on, scratched and bleeding, staving through bushes, stumbling over logs, and just missing by the merest luck the thick trees that covered the hillside. It was so dark that I could scarcely see a hand’s breadth before me; and yet all the time my pursuers hung close on my heels. I was wondering how it was that they could follow me so truly when I suddenly realized that

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I was making enough noise for a deaf man to follow me. What with the swishing and snapping of the foliage and the rolling of stones down the hill, I might as well have been shouting them directions. I saw at once that I should be overtaken at this rate, for already they had gained on me. With quick determination I changed my course and plunged down towards the river.

“To the river, Buck! He’s makin’ fer the river!” roared out Bottom, and I heard him smashing like an avalanche down the hillside.

When I reached the level ground between the water and the foot of the hill I paused for three heart-beats, at a stick what to do. The stars were twinkling brightly now, and in the glimmering dark I saw that the bank in front of me was very sparsely wooded. I could run more easily, but then I offered a better shot too. Still, there was nothing for it but to take to my heels again; and that I did, and not a moment too soon either. With eager cries, like hounds that pick up the scent afresh, Bottom and Webb burst down upon the bank and raced after me.

“Stop, you little ——” but here followed a perfect spout of vile epithets which ended in another detonation from the pistol. This time the bullet sang past my ear, not three inches away, I think.

Then, before I knew it, I had broken headlong through a clump of bushes and fallen prone upon my face on the other side. But I was not hurt, only dazed a little. Recovering myself in a trice, I took the situation in at a glance. The bushes formed a sort of

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irregular hedge that ran quite to the brink of the river. Beyond, the ground was even more devoid of concealment than what I had already traversed. My position was become desperate. Within five seconds my pursuers would be upon me.

Like a flash my resolve was taken. Stooping, I darted towards the river, determined to plunge in. At the edge of the low bank my foot struck something hard, and, while I yet reeled in recovering my balance, I changed my mind. It was the work of only an instant to grasp the rock — for rock it was — and hurl it out into the water. At the sound of the splash Bottom, who was now charging through the bushes, bellowed out, “He’s dove in, Buck! Watch fer his head!” bounded to the margin of the river and stood, panting and peering intently, not five feet from where I lay. His pistol still smoked in his hand, and his under jaw protruded wickedly. His whole attitude breathed murder, and I knew I should receive but short shrift once I fell into his hands.

Meantime Webb had run further down the shore. Suddenly he uttered a cry and pointed out upon the surface.

“Yonder he is, Jerry! See his head! ’bout thirty feet out an’ swimmin’ with the current!”

Now what kind saint it was that sent that log down the river just in the nick of this emergency I shall never know, I suppose, until I get to heaven. Perhaps it was Our Lady; if so, it will not be the greatest favor I shall have to thank her for. At all events, the two desperadoes were pouring forth their curses upon a

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senseless bit of wood while I, their game, was lying in the bushes as safe as a rabbit. Save that my peril was by no means past, I could almost have found it in my heart to laugh at them.

“Take that, you little spyin’ devil!” cried Bottom, and fires at the chunk of floating wood.

“Missed, by thunder!” exclaimed Webb. “Here, down here, Jerry! Here’s a better shot!”

But I didn’t wait for the better shot. The two of them were thirty yards off now, and the uproar they were making allowed me to creep back through the bushes unobserved. As I emerged on the other side, bang! went the pistol again, and I heard Webb cry, “Took him that time!” and Bottom’s answer, prefaced by a curse of disappointment, “Took a blessed bit o’ driftwood, that’s what I took.”

I didn’t linger to hear more. With fear to spur me on, I showed a wonderful clean pair of heels, I can tell you. The turf was soft and springy, and deadened all sound of my retreating steps. On, on I raced, while the voices of my foes grew fainter and fainter. Presently, blowing like a horse, I came abreast of the circular escarpment in the hillside and paused briefly to look in. The fire still blazed, illuminating the enclosure very plainly. I glanced swiftly around. At the foot of the back wall stood a box. It was littered with cards, and upon the cards were scattered some small objects that gleamed brightly in the firelight. The next second I had leaped inside and was bending over the improvised card-table. The objects I had seen were bullets: our enemies’ entire supply perhaps,

MY NIGHT ADVENTURE — Continued

for on the ground I found a little green box of them freshly opened. Suppressing a cry of joy, I put the box in my pocket and swept the rest off the table and into my cap. Then, once more, I resumed my flight and didn't pull up till I reached the gravel-bar.

Here I scanned the river for some sight of Ned and Hal, who, I knew, must have started ere this for our ledge. But not a glimpse of them did I get, at least up the middle of the stream where the starlight lay. The shore-line was shrouded in shadow; doubtless they were taking advantage of this protection.

I put off again, running easily along the bar close to the skirt of the woods. As I trotted forward I fell to wondering what Ned and Hal thought when they heard the pistol shots and the shouting. They must certainly have supposed me done for after all that cannonading; and I chuckled to myself as I pictured their surprise when I should drop down upon the ledge.

CHAPTER XXIV

Next Morning on the Ledge

HAPPY as a lark over my escape and especially glad at the good tidings I was bringing, I skipped forward with as light a foot as ever boy set to earth. After a little I came to the upper extremity of the bar which lay under the north end of the first hill — Hunter's Hill now for sure, I thought. Here I paused long enough to fling Bottom's bullets far out into the stream. "You won't smoke any 'possums out with those, Jerry Bottom," I said; and with that I began to make my way along the base of the hill.

It was rougher going here, as the slope was mortal steep; and several times I came within an ace of sliding into the river. But although the way was difficult and my progress, in consequence, much slower, I succeeded at all events in getting forward without mishap. Once, as I mounted a broad boulder that lay athwart my path and stopped to take breath, a sudden brightness fell upon the trees that lined the opposite shore; and, although I could see it not, I knew that the moon was rising over the hill above me.

It was some twenty minutes later, I suppose, when I arrived at the base of the cliff at last. I stood there for a moment or two, giving ear. Sure enough, after a space, I caught the sound of low voices; Ned and Hal were on the ledge.

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Wishing to make the surprise as complete as possible, I did not call out but stealthily ascended the hill alongside the bluff. I had little difficulty in locating the ash-tree as the moonbeams were falling in slanting shafts all about me. I shinned up the trunk as softly as I could and had just got half way out on our "entrance" limb and could already see them sitting below on the ledge, when Hal jumped suddenly to his feet.

"The rifle, Ned!" he cried in a low tone. "There's something in that tree!"

"It's me, you little son of a gun," I called down. "And don't you go shooting. I've had enough bullets fired at me to-night." And thereupon I scrambled further out, swung down, and dropped to the ledge.

Well, I was mighty glad to see those two fellows again, I can tell you! And they were mighty glad to see me too, I think, for they wrung my hands and slapped me on the back and didn't ask a question for a full minute; and this, I take it, was the surest sign of their rejoicing at my safe return.

"Well," said Ned at length, "did you find anything out?"

"I found out that they don't know anything more about Hunter's Hill than we do," I replied. I saw Ned's face fall, and Hal said, "Aw gee!"

"But," I continued, "they thought it was one of the two hills on either side of Hunter's Ford. They've already discovered it isn't the other. So it must be this one we're standing on!"

At these words Ned and Hal brightened perceptibly.

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Then, sitting down, I related the story of my adventure from beginning to end.

“Gee!” said Ned, “that was great! I wish I’d been in your shoes.”

“You could ‘a’ been in my shoes and welcome,” said I. “I don’t want any more bullets whistling about my ears.”

“Well, but do you think this is Hunter’s Hill?” asked Hal, who had a habit of coming to the point.

“Of course it’s Hunter’s Hill, you crazy,” Ned replied. “What do you suppose Bottom’s been doing for the past fifteen years? If this isn’t Hunter’s Hill, there’s no Hunter’s Hill in Missouri.”

“That’s just it,” returned Hal, “it mightn’t be in Missouri at all.”

“In South Africa then, I suppose,” Ned derided, “or maybe Australia.”

There were a great many places nearer than either, but I didn’t say anything, and let Ned have his way; though, to be sure, Hal was right.

“Now,” resumed Ned, after having thus established the identity of Hunter’s Hill, “we’ll have to do some scouting to-morrow. We’ll have to spy on Bottom and Webb and watch their movements. They’ll probably search one side of the hill, and we’ve got to find which side they’re on; then we’ll search the other.”

“But suppose,” said I, “Bottom takes one side and Webb the other?”

“Well,” Ned replied, “in that case we’ll take the top. Most likely that’s where the triple-blazed oak

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is anyway. Gee, fellows!" he added rapturously, "supposing we find her first crack out o' the box!"

Well, as you may imagine, we continued talking for a long while after that. Ned's enthusiasm soon dispelled my doubts about Hunter's Hill, and even Hal waxed somewhat sanguine; though, to tell the truth, he never quite relinquished his misgivings. Counting his chickens before they were hatched, Ned had already formed a dozen schemes for spending our treasure gold. One I remember distinctly: the Western Stars were to get Spalding-made uniforms, a prodigious supply of bats and balls and gloves, and travel up to Washington for a game three weeks from that next Sunday.

Very likely we should have kept on building air-castles until morning had not Hal suggested turning in. There wasn't much to turn in to, except our blankets. But after I had wrapped myself up in mine I was tolerably comfortable; though the rock did feel uncommonly hard. I suppose our quarters de luxe of the previous night had somewhat spoiled me.

I thought at first that I should sleep like a log, for I was dead tired. But what with the excitement of my recent adventure and what with thinking on the treasure, it was long indeed before slumber came. I lay there for I don't know how many minutes—nearly an hour, I think—staring up at the broad moon that swam above me. I slept at last, however, but it was an uneasy restless sleep. For the greater part of the night I tossed about on my hard bed, troubled by a multitude of outlandish dreams. Colossal images of Jerry

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Bottom loomed up before my mind: sometimes he would be shooting a pistol as long as a fence-rail, and I heard the report even in my sleep; at other times again he would be carrying on his shoulders enormous ingots of gold and crossing the river at a stride, like the giant in the fairy-tale. Sometimes, too, Ned and Hal and I would be standing on the top of a mountain of gold-pieces, and far below two little figures were looking up at us and shaking their fists.

Well, these absurd phantasms gradually passed away, and towards morning I fell into a profound and restful slumber.

What awakened me I did not for the moment know. I knew only that it was broad day and that the sun was shining on the trees across the river. Then, just as I was on the point of springing to my feet, I heard a guarded voice below the ledge:

“What do you make o’ them scratches then? They’re fresh enough.”

You may fancy my dismay; it was the voice of Bottom!

“But what ’ud bring ’em up thar’? I tell you, Jerry, them kids is skipped, an’ glad to git away too. We’re a couple o’ fools fer beatin’ up an’ down this river.”

It was Webb that spoke, and I prayed that his word might prevail. But at Bottom’s answer my heart sank within me.

“Hit may be as you’re right, Buck; but you just run her nose agin the shore, an’ let me have a look. I got one catterdge left in this ole howitzer as I means

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to pump into that imp o' hell what hooked the rest of 'em."

Upon that I heard the dip of oars and then a step on the rock below. I glanced about me, distraught and terrified. What should I do? What could I do? Ned was at my side, but I dared not wake him. The least noise would betray us. Then, all at once, I realized where Hal was lying. He had rolled in his sleep to within two feet of the brink of the ledge. If he so much as raised his head, we were gone. At any moment he and Ned might awake of their own accord; and they would be sure to yawn or say something before I could warn them. You may fancy my agony of mind!

"It's pretty steep here, Buck, sure enough," said Bottom's voice again, still in the same low, careful tone. "But if I k'n make this next step now I'll be able to touch the top a'most."

There followed then a sharp grating sound, as of hobnails scraping stone; and I knew that Bottom had reached the last ridge of rock.

Determined to sell our lives as dearly as possible, I stealthily stretched out my arm for the rifle that stood against the cliff, and drew it towards me. Much as I dreaded taking human life, I was resolved to fire so soon as Bottom's head appeared above the ledge: it was his blood or mine, that was certain; and I had the right of self-defense.

All this while I kept my eyes darting from Ned to Hal, from Hal to the edge of the rock and back again to Ned. I must not only be on the alert for the first

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sight of Bottom but I must watch my two companions besides. At their least stir I meant to warn them if I could. But I had little hope of succeeding, with our foes so close upon us. Altogether, it was a torturing business, the most nerve-racking ordeal I have ever experienced.

Presently, as I lay there with the rifle held before me on the ledge, I saw the grimed tips — more like hideous stumps — of four huge fingers. Up over the top they stretched and then settled, clawing, on the rock, like the blunted black talons of some foul vulture.

"I just kin reach her, Buck," said Bottom's voice. "Come up here an' gimme a lift."

At these words, sounding so terribly close that I marveled Hal did not wake, my courage almost forsook me. Up to the present I had entertained half a hope that Bottom might yet give over his attempt to scale our retreat. But now I knew that he was fixed in his purpose. Breathing a hasty prayer to Our Lady, I cuddled the rifle-butt to my shoulder, drew a bead on a point one inch above the ugly fingers, and waited.

I had not long to wait. Webb, being more agile than Bottom, quickly mounted the treacherous slopes of rock, though not without a little grumbling at his companion's "fool ideers." Then, after a moment, another hand appeared over the top of the ledge, and in its grasp was a long black pistol.

By this time my heart was going like a trip-hammer, but the rifle in my hands was as steady as death.

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Death it was that I meant to deal that murderer so soon as his great evil face showed above the brink. I had steeled myself to it, though it was an awful act.

“All right, Jerry, I got yer leg. Now hup you goes!”

My finger trembled on the trigger.

But up he didn’t go. There was a sudden sharp cry of dismay, followed by one tremendous oath; then, amidst a roaring volley of profanity, the two rogues bowled down the steep incline and pitched with a loud splash full into the river.

CHAPTER XXV

The Triple-Blazed Oak

MAZED by this sudden turn of circumstances, as fortunate as it was sudden, I lay there for a space quite powerless to act.

At the first loud cry of our enemies Hal had sprung to a sitting posture, rubbing his eyes; and Ned, at my elbow, had raised his head.

"What's the matter?" he asked sleepily.

At his question my presence of mind returned, and breathing the one word, "Bottom!" I threw myself across the ledge and jerked Hal flat upon the rock. "Lie low," I whispered, "for your life!"

From the first I judged that Hal had been unobserved, for even now the two blackguards were still floundering about in the water in their endeavor to gain a foothold on the slippery rock; yet I could not be certain of it.

Not a dozen words were spoken, however, ere my doubts were dispelled.

"See thar,'" spluttered Webb, spitting water, "that's what comes o' yer fool ideers! Tryin' to climb a cliff what a hackerbat couldn't set foot on! You're satisfied now, I hope!" Here he fell to cursing again; he cursed things in general at the start, gradually getting more specific as his vocabulary waxed richer; we three, the cliff, the river,

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Hunter's Hill, the treasure—all came in for a share; and finally he rounded off with as fearful a fusillade of invective against Jerry Bottom as that rascal had ever received.

"Easy now, Buck friend, easy!" sounded Bottom's suave voice (who, I supposed, by this time had regained the bank). "I 'low you knowed a river was down here, an' I 'low you knows who tumbled us into her."

Webb spat again, and I fancied I could almost see the snarl on his dog-like features.

"An' I 'low I knows too the biggest idjut out of a madhouse in this here State," he answered.

"Which ain't complimentin' yourself none neither, Buck lad," returned Bottom as sweetly as ever. "But you always was touch an' go, you was; I'll say that fer you. So I'll forgit them endearin' titles you was namin' me by. I'm ready to call quits. I'll even go a step fu'ther, an' say you was right: I *was* a bit of a fool fer wantin' to climb that thar' ledge. Them kids ain't up thar', you says; an' right you was, Buck. They're clippin' down the river, says you; which same is not on'y right, says I, but nat'ral too. Come now, I reckon that's handsome enough. Let's be a-gittin' back to camp an' dryin' off. Then we'll beat this here hill."

You may fancy the load that was taken off my mind when I heard these words. Hal, who was still lying near the edge of the rock, turned his head and grinned.

To his companion's overtures of amity Webb

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returned a grumbling answer; and shortly after we heard them both embark in their skiff—Bottom still admitting that he *was* a “bit of an ole fool”—and put off down the river.

But we dared not stir for some time; we guessed that they must still be casting an occasional eye back at the ledge, especially Bottom for all his protestations. Besides, we were not sure but what the whole proceeding was a feint, a piece of strategy, to catch us off our guard and have us reveal ourselves. But as the sound of the oars diminished in the distance we gradually became more assured of our safety, and even crept to the brink of the ledge.

Our view of the river downstream was partially cut off by the right wing of the cliff; yet upon the surface that was visible to us there was no trace of a boat. Our enemies had vanished utterly.

“Gee,” said Ned, “that was a close shave!”

“Well,” said I, “at least we know they’ve only got one bullet left. I must have made a clean sweep of their ammunition all right.”

“Gosh,” said Hal, “it’s a wonder they didn’t see our boat.”

“Didn’t you sink her?” I cried, astonished.

“Of course we sunk her, but the river slants so steep from the shore we were afraid to let her down more than a foot under water.”

“Well,” said Ned, “they didn’t see her, and that’s enough. A miss is as good as a mile. Now let’s get a bite to eat and begin exploring. We’ve

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got to get a wiggle on us if we want to find the triple-blazed oak before they do."

Not daring to build a fire, we ate a cold breakfast of ham-sandwiches which we found in Mrs. Plover's hamper; and mighty good they were too. After that, Ned was all for striking out at once, but I said that we ought to tarry a little longer as our enemies might still be watching the ledge; there was no telling what trick they might have up their sleeve, I said; and Hal was of my own way of thinking too. So Ned gave in, chafing a good deal at what he called our "conservative policy." (Ned always was a good hand at using long words.)

"Well," said he, "if you fellows are going to hang around here all day, I'll clean the gun. May as well be doing something."

He ejected our three remaining cartridges, took the rifle apart, and began to swab the bore with the wooden ramrod. This, of course, was a wholly unnecessary operation, as the gun had been cleaned several times since the shooting of the turkey. But Ned was in a tiff, so we let him have his way.

At length, however, more to appease him than because we thought the coast entirely clear, Hal and I said we were ready; and taking our newly furbished weapon, we slipped over the brow of the ledge and set out on our treasure hunt.

As we came around the northern end of the cliff, Hal halted with a low cry of amazement and peered into the river.

"What's the matter?" I asked, whisking about.

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"She's gone!" he exclaimed. "Clean out of sight!"

Sure enough, our boat, which he and Ned had submerged, had slid out and down on the shelving rock to the bed of the river. That was the last of the good ship *Big Cat*; we never saw her again.

"That's the end of our trip, I guess," said I.

"Aw gee!" desponded Hal, "and us with a trot-line to run too."

"Come on," cried Ned; "what do we care for that old tub of a boat! We're treasure hunting now!"

Recalled by these words to the business in hand, we put off again and soon forgot our loss—at least I did, though Hal, I fancy, was still thinking on the trot-line he couldn't run.

"I guess we'd better cross right over the top and explore the other side," suggested Ned, who was toiling up the hill in front of us. "Bottom and Webb'll probably take this side first. We've got to go easy though. We'll separate when we get there. I'll take the top; Bert, you take the middle, and Hal'll take the bottom." He halted and turned around. "We'll work up to the other end, and if any of us catches sight of the enemy he'll have to warn the other two."

"But how'll he warn 'em?" I asked.

"That's right. Let's see now." Ned looked about him as though he half expected to see the necessary warning hanging in the trees.

"I've got it!" he exclaimed. "Whistle like a quail! B-bob-white—like that. It's dead easy. We

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can all do it; and they'll never suspect it in the world."

We practised for a while, whistling very low, and then pushed on up the hill.

At the summit, which we reached after a long and wonderful steep climb, we came on a plateau, even broader than Paul Plover's, that sloped up gently towards the middle of the hill. It was less densely wooded than the acclivity we had just ascended, but the trees were much larger, being mostly oak and hickory and walnut, with pleasant, sun-checkered vistas of waving grass lying between them. Just to our right and a little way down from the terrace-like hilltop bulked out the immense mass of rock whose sheer front formed the cliff beneath which we had spent the night. It was covered with fresh and abundant verdure—long grass, thick clusters of bushes, and several smaller trees. Though it slanted up somewhat sharply to the plateau, its outer extremity, the last few yards, was practically level.

"Let's go down and have a look," said I.

"Yes," said Hal, "and have Jerry Bottom take a pop at you. I thought we were treasure hunting, not sight seeing."

"Oh, we'll be back in a jiffy," said Ned, and the two of us scrambled down the incline, leaving Hal, who was a trifle huffed, seated at the foot of a tree.

It was a very beautiful view we had from the cliff. The entire bottom-land lay at our feet like a garden; and the river, bordering its westward side, gleamed like a narrow girdle of silver. We could see even

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beyond the range of hills on the north to where old Quarry lifted its wooded crest at the side of Fox Creek.

Wishing to take a look directly beneath, we got down on our hands and knees and crept to the brink. It was a tremendous height. I had thought the bluff high from which Ned had jumped to Nettie's rescue, but it dwarfed considerably in comparison with this one; at least that was my impression as I lay there looking fearfully below. The ledge on which we had slept was now shrunk to the width of a table, and Mrs. Plover's hamper looked like a doll's basket.

"Gee, Ned," said I, "let's move back, or I'll be getting dizzy and pitch over." And without waiting for him I edged away from the precipice and went up the hill to join Hal.

He was still beneath the tree under which we had left him, but he was standing now, with his hands in his pockets, looking up along the trunk.

"What's the matter?" said I. "Have you found her already?"

He raised his hand and pointed.

"No. I was just looking at that funny bump there. See; it looks like a big wart, doesn't it?"

A wart indeed was exactly what it resembled. A knotty excrescence, somewhat longer than your hand and a shade lighter than the surrounding bark, though smoother—I had seen such growths before in Forest Park.

"Some trees grow that way," I explained. "I've seen 'em in town."

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Just then Ned came up, and we showed him the odd bump on the trunk. His face lighted up at once, and he got very much excited.

"Is there another one?" he cried. "Look around! Look around!"

"This is an oak all right," I began, "but shucks—"

"Sure enough!" he exclaimed from the other side of the tree. "Look over here! Here's another blaze—and another! Three of them! Hurrah, fellows, we've found the triple-blazed oak!"

Around on the opposite side of the tree were two more protuberant growths, matching precisely the first we had discovered. One was a foot or so above our heads, and the other down close to the ground.

"Shucks," said I, "you don't call those blazes, do you? When you blaze a tree you cut the bark off so you can see the white wood beneath."

Ned looked at me scornfully.

"When do you think this blazin' was done—yesterday? Fifteen years ago this tree was blazed, and these are just the kind of marks that would be left. Gee, fellows, we're lucky!" And he turned a handspring on the grass.

Well, you could have knocked me down with a feather! That wasn't the sort of blaze I expected at all; nor Hal either, to judge by his astonished face. It didn't take us long, however, to see that Ned was right; and the next instant we were locked in each other's arms and rolling around on the grass out of sheer joy at our discovery.

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Suddenly Ned sat bolt upright.

“Jerry Bottom!” he warned. “We’ve forgotton him and Webb!”

These words quickly brought us down to earth again.

“Gee, that’s right!” said I. “Let’s measure off the distance. Got the letter, Hal?”

Hal was already on his feet, with one eye puckered at the sun.

“Don’t need the letter,” he answered; “got it by heart.” And indeed by the way he rattled it off there was no doubting he had got it by heart. “Hunter’s Hill triple-blazed oak fifteen north ten west down! There’s the west,” he added, pointing across the river; “so that ought to make the north straight up along the top of the hill.”

“Fifteen north,” said I: “fifteen what?”

“First, let’s try feet,” Ned suggested, suiting the action to the word and measuring off the distance. He came to a halt upon a grassy bit of ground, still beneath the oak, that looked as though it had not been touched for a century.

“Here she is, fellows, right here!” he cried, dropping to his knees and stabbing a stick into the turf to mark the spot.

“But how’re we goin’ to dig?” asked Hal.

Quite taken aback, Ned could only stare up blankly in answer.

“Gee!” said I, “we’re great treasure hunters, we are. We might ‘a’ known we’d need spades. Here,

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I've got my knife. Let's see what's under the grass anyway."

Cutting a circle around the stick, I gouged out the sod with my fingers and then began to scrape into the sandy soil. But I had not scraped an inch ere I felt something hard.

"The treasure!" I cried, and wildly plucked at the yellow earth. Ned and Hal sprang to my side and plunged their hands into the hole. Then looking closely,

"Shucks," said Hal, in disgust, "that's a rock, Bert, nothing but a darned old rock!"

CHAPTER XXVI

Dead Man's Cave

“WELL,” said I, “the treasure might be under the rock. Let’s dig her up.”

“We’ll need a stick o’ dynamite for that,” answered Hal. “I’ll bet that rock’s the size of a house.”

“Let’s try yards,” said Ned, “and see where that lands us. Maybe we’ll hit the treasure right away.”

So saying, he went back to the tree, stepped off fifteen paces to the north and then faced towards the river. At the seventh step he reached the margin of the plateau, just where the ground began to dip.

“That’s no better than before,” said I, disappointed. “That’ll land you right on that rock down there.”

Sure enough, the tenth yard placed him square atop a considerable boulder that lay buried in the hillside. It was covered with moss and lichen and was apparently immovable, for there was no telling how far it extended back into the hill. This site indeed looked even less promising than the former, and our hearts sank.

“Can we budge her, do you think?” asked Ned, stepping to the ground.

Before I could make answer, Hal, who was on his

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knees and nosing like a terrier around the base of the boulder, uttered a sudden cry.

“Here’s a hole, fellows, here along the side! Isn’t any rabbit-hole either.”

There was, as he said, a hole in the ground about the size of my cap. It shelved in under the rock and looked as black as night.

Ned jumped to his feet.

“O boys! This is the spot all right, sure as you’re born! Now if we can only move this rock!”

To our surprised delight, after we had torn away some of the earth at the back of it, we found that the boulder sheered off abruptly so as to allow of a sufficient purchase for prizing. Then, all in a fever of excitement, we scurried about for a strong piece of fallen timber (which was quickly found, as the hill was littered with such debris), and, using the edge of our excavation as a fulcrum, we swung on our lever and sent the boulder crashing down the hill-side.

The sight that met our eyes quite astonished us. The hole Hal discovered had suddenly yawned larger—a funnel-like depression that ended at the bottom in a gaping black mouth through which a man might drop, it seemed, into the very bowels of the earth.

“Gee!” cried Ned in awe-struck tones, “a cave!”

“Do you think the treasure’s down there?” said I doubtfully.

“Of course it is,” he answered. “What else is a cave for ‘cept to hide treasure in? Specially when

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there's treasure to hide. You and Hal run down to camp and fetch up the lantern and the rest of the trot-line. And I'll keep guard."

Well, Hal and I had not been gone very long upon our errand (though the hill, as I have said, was wonderful steep climbing), and yet, as we neared the cave again, I saw no sign of Ned. It was strange, I thought, but I said nothing to Hal who was a little distance behind me. The closer I approached the stronger my misgivings became, until, running up over the embankment, I beheld Ned's head just emerging from the throat of the dark pit.

"What the deuce you doing!" I gasped, all out of breath but infinitely relieved.

"Explorin'," he answered, as calm as you please. "I tried her out for about six feet; you can go down as slick as a whistle. Fine footholds in the sides. Here, we'll let the lantern down first, and see where the bottom is. Gimme."

He took the lantern, lighted it, and, as the three of us leaned over the opening, let it down slowly into the black depth.

For the first few feet it burned brightly, and we could see the dusky gray walls of rock, with sharp protrusions here and there against which the lantern clinked and rattled. But suddenly the flame seemed to weaken, the light flickered and waned, and we could scarcely discern anything but a dull glow in a well of inky darkness. Just then the line went slack in Ned's fingers, and simultaneously the light below was extinguished.

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“What’s that?” I cried.

“Bad air,” said Ned promptly; “didn’t you notice how dim she was getting? It smelled kinda funny when I went down, and my head was only a few feet under.”

Drawing the lantern out then and measuring the line, we found that our first landing-place was exactly fifteen feet below the surface of the hill.

“But shucks,” said Ned, striking a match, “that doesn’t make any difference. We can stand a little bad air, I hope. There’s treasure hid down there, fellows!”

But Hal shook his head.

“We better wait a while, Ned,” said he. “Better make sure. That treasure isn’t going to run away. We better wait two hours at least.”

I was of the same opinion as Hal; so Ned finally yielded, as he usually did when he saw that we were both against him. But it was the longest two hours I ever spent, notwithstanding that we went down to the river and took a swim, then pitched in once more to the good things in Mrs. Plover’s basket, and afterwards fell to building air castles till our faculty of invention was quite exhausted. And when at last we did climb up the hill again to the cave I very much doubt if we had tarried our allotted time, though Hal had said “two hours at least.”

Well, the first thing we did was to let the lantern down again, and on this second trial it burned steadily and clearly plumb to the bottom.

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"Now leave her there," said Ned. "I'll go first, and you fellows follow when I give the signal."

Taking the rifle in his hand, he carefully felt his way through the opening and slowly descended. It gave me a rather creepy sensation to see him gradually disappear into that black mouth; it was so like being swallowed alive.

"How is it?" I called, bending over. His head was several feet below the surface now, but I could still see one of his hands which was grasping the highest jut of rock.

"Easy as pie," he answered, and his voice sounded strange and muffled. "Footholds on this side are best; and you can lean back against the other. Dead easy!"

Just then my foot slipped, loosening a quantity of gravelly detritus which fell rattling down on top of him.

"Hey," he yelled, "cut that out, will you! Be careful or you'll break this lantern—and my head too. . . . All right, come on; I'm on the bottom."

I went next. Taking my courage in my two hands, I slid my legs into the entrance and felt about for a footing. But I found nothing; and for a moment or so, while my legs dangled in empty space and my hold above relaxed more and more, I came near giving up the ghost. But just as I thought I must plunge to the bottom I felt a hand grasp my right foot and place it on something solid.

"You're all right now," said Ned's voice. "Look down and see where you're going."

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I did so, and sure enough I made out plainly the clean-cut projections of rock. The next moment I was at his side, and we called up to Hal. He had better luck than I, and descended without mishap.

The air was very chilly down here, a marked contrast to the heat of the day above; and I was sorry I had left my coat at camp.

"Now," said Ned, "let's see where we are. Looks rather tame, I should say."

But to my eyes, I must confess, it didn't look tame at all; I think Ned spoke in this way just to fortify his nerve. Directly overhead we could see a circular patch of blue sky with a puff of cottony cloud at its edge: our last glimpse of the daylight. All about us was dark as the tomb, save where the yellow-burning wick shed its circle of feeble rays.

Ned raised the lantern, and as he did so I started with horror. On a ledge of the wall, not five inches from his face, the head of a large snake was lifted, with its jaws open and its forked tongue a-quiver. At the same instant a low rattling sound began to fill the air which grew momentarily louder.

"Look out, Ned!" I cried.

"What's the matter?" He still held the light aloft.

"A snake! Right by your head! Duck!"

Instead of ducking he looked around square into the reptile's beady eyes. But he did not turn a lash.

"Give me your knife, Bert," he said in a low even voice, moving the lantern a little nearer to the snake's head. "He can't see; the light blinds him."

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Reaching back his free hand, he took my knife and, while I gazed on in a sort of fearful fascination, slowly and carefully placed the blade just over the glistening scaly neck; then, suddenly, bore down on it with all his might.

What followed sent me reeling back in terror, so that I almost knocked Hal down. With a whirring rattle the long writhing body shot in a coil around Ned's arm, tightening and relaxing and tightening again; but the gaping red mouth with its trembling tongue lay beneath the blade.

"There," said Ned, "that'll settle Mr. Rattlesnake, I guess;" and he coolly unwound from his arm the yet moving body.

It was the first time I had ever seen a rattlesnake, though, of course, I had often heard of them and their venomous bite that produced certain and painful death. It was with a kind of dread interest, then, that I watched Ned cut off the peculiar organ at the extremity of the tail which he said were the rattles. There were eleven of such, and at the end of them a little horny nib, like a button. That meant that the snake was eleven and a half years old, Ned explained.

"Gee, I guess this isn't a souvenir!" said he proudly, putting the rattles in his pocket. "Got turkey feathers beat a mile!"

Hal returned nothing to this sally, but, for my own part, I thought his feathers made a much more pleasant souvenir than Ned's grim relic.

After we had recovered somewhat from the

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shock of this rencounter (cold shivers were still running up and down my spine), we began to move forward along a low corridor that dipped slightly and widened perceptibly at every step.

Ned took the lead, holding the lantern aloft and peering ahead into the thick gloom; I followed next, carrying my knife, and Hal with the rifle brought up the rear.

We had not proceeded ten yards along this first passage, which led straight into the hillside, when Ned halted abruptly.

"She ends here, fellows," he said. "There's a solid wall in front of us."

But he was mistaken. As we reached the wall we saw on our left a high fissure in the rocky side, sufficiently wide to allow of our going through. Once beyond this opening we found ourselves in a broad passage still gently sloping downward and running, apparently, parallel with the length of the hill. Its height we could not determine, as our yellow lantern-light lost itself in the dark vault above. The walls on either hand were sweating water now, which trickled down and formed a little stream that flowed in a groove along the middle of the tunnel. The rock all about us was coated with a soft clay that shone a dusky red; it adhered to our clothes when we brushed against the sides, being as sticky as glue.

It was strange how little we spoke, though we felt that we were nearing the treasure at every stride. Somehow the intense darkness which engulfed us

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and the deep silence and the high glimmering corridor and the unseen things that lay ahead and the sense of being so completely cut off from the bright world above—all this weighed heavily upon our hearts and somehow made us rather loth to talk. Even when we came on a heap of bones—the remains of some wild animal—Ned only pointed at it; and we pursued our way without a word.

Presently the passage turned sharply to our right, still at a slight incline, and after ten or twelve yards brought us to a steep bank of brash or loose rock. This bank was only some four feet high, but in attempting its descent Ned lost his footing and went slithering to the bottom. The sudden jar extinguished the lantern and left us in the pitchiest darkness I have ever experienced. It was only with difficulty that we could strike a match, as the moisture all about us had so penetrated our clothes that there was scarcely a dry spot left on them.

At length, with lantern relighted, we proceeded on our way. Each step took us deeper into the heart of the hill, and I wondered if we should ever get out of this inferno of Stygian shade and abysmal solitude and behold again the smiling blue sky. But then came the thought of the treasure; we were approaching closer to it every moment; and my anxiety gave place to a great expectation.

We had advanced along this third passage for about fifty or sixty yards when Ned, who was in front, suddenly halted and raised the lantern over his head.

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“This looks like the end for sure,” he said in a subdued tone. “Let me see.” He stepped forward a pace or two. “No, gee no! There’s a big opening in the left wall!”

Then, just as he came abreast of this new turn, the lantern in his hand struck against a jut of rock and flickered out. With a rush the overhanging gloom enveloped us.

Before I could gather my wits Ned uttered a low cry and reeled back against me. I felt his hand grip my arm convulsively.

“Look!” he gasped, in a choking terrified voice.

I took one step forward and peered down the passage to my left. And as I looked my hair stood on end and my heart stopped beating. Before me in mid air,—how near or far, I could not tell—all in a lurid greenish blue, glowed the grinning figure of a human skeleton!

CHAPTER XXVII

What Happened in Dead Man's Cave

“**W**HAT’S wrong with you guys?” asked Hal out of the darkness behind. His sturdy, matter-of-fact tone was a reassuring sound in my ears. It seemed to render the ghastly spectacle less forbidding.

“Come here and look,” said Ned with a little quake in his voice.

“Gee!” said Hal, “a real skeleton! Well, let’s light the lantern. I guess we’re near the treasure all right.”

Hal’s calmness and self-possession made me rather ashamed of myself, and Ned too, I fancy, felt somewhat abashed. Besides, Hal had recalled the object of our quest, which I at least had momentarily forgotten; and this helped to banish our fright.

“I know what that light is,” said Ned, fumbling with the lantern and talking out boldly (which was good to hear). “That’s foxfire. Funny I didn’t think of it before. You see it at night on rotten logs and such. Looks kinda ghosty, doesn’t it? There, she’s lit. Now let’s have a peep at old man skeleton.”

Though he spoke with so much assurance, it was with considerable trepidation (*my* heart at least was

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going pitapat) that we walked down a short passageway to the threshold of a large chamber.

In the opposite wall, some four or five feet from the ground, stood the skeleton, still glimmering with phosphorescence even in the lantern's shine. It was a weird unearthly sight, and for a moment we could not help pausing in a certain awe.

Approaching closer then, we saw how the thing was fixed in its position. Half sitting, it lay back in a shallow niche as snugly as if it had been fitted there. About its feet was strewn some molded stuff that must have been clothing once upon a time, though the decayed matter that now fell apart under our touch certainly bore no resemblance to cloth.

"He was hung," said Ned in a voice that had suddenly lost its bravado. "See how they strung him up there to that rock."

Sure enough, from a jutting crag overhead depended a length of rope, frayed and rotten. Murder had been done down here in this black hole; but when and by whom, there was no telling. The mere thought that where we stood a man had struggled for his life—pleaded perhaps piteously while the vault of gloom above echoed his agonizing cries, and his captors but mocked and jibed and laughed—the mere thought of all this made my blood run cold.

"Gee," grumbled Hal, "I don't see any treasure."

This sudden remark plucked me out of the past.

"You don't?" said I and began making a survey of the chamber. It was a large apartment, somewhat square in shape, with a high narrow fissure in one

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corner, too narrow to admit the passage of a man, through which flowed the little stream that we had followed. I put my ear close to this opening and hearkened. From far below came the sound of splashing water; possibly an underground river, I thought.

“Look here,” cried Ned from the opposite corner, “here’s another passageway. I wonder if there’s any more to this cave.” Without further ado he plunged down this new tunnel, leaving Hal and me in total darkness, save for the glimmering skeleton above us.

“Hey,” I began, but the next moment I saw the light reappear up the passage we had already traversed.

“That leads right back to where we first saw the skeleton,” said Ned, returning to the chamber.

So indeed it did, and on closer inspection we found that it was an enormous wedge of rock that separated the two passages. The one Ned had just explored was fairly wide at the mouth but tapered off into a very narrow cleft just at the right-angle turn of the main passage.

“Well,” said Ned, “here we are at the end of the cave and nothing but an old skeleton for our pains. I wonder,” he added despondently, “if that cipher didn’t mean just a skeleton.”

“There’s nothing else down here that I can see,” said I. “This floor is solid rock and as smooth as pavement, and the walls the same mostly.”

A sudden cry from Hal whisked us about.

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"Here, let's have the light!" said he excitedly.
"There's some writing here!"

He stood looking at the wall to the left of the skeleton. As we crossed to his side he snatched the lantern from Ned and held it up close to the gleaming red clay. Sure enough, to our astonishment, we beheld a number of lines of roughly drawn letters and below them a large skull and cross-bones. The characters seemed to have been scrawled with a nail or other pointed object—a dagger, perhaps—and they looked as fresh as if they had been graven that very day.

"What is it?" cried Ned. "What's it say?"

Hal followed the writing with the lantern, line after line, reading slowly; and this is what he read:

We do all swear with our right hands up
that we will not touch the swag here buried
until two years are up and that then on
Sept. 30, '80 we will meet in Gus's place at
Kimley if not nabbed. The swag will be
divided share and share alike among them
that are there.

P. Roach	Kid Kattles
D. Johnson	H. Harvey Hackett

And at the bottom, beneath the skull and cross-bones, was appended this terrible pleasantry, which partially revealed the identity of the skeleton:

P. S. Bill, you wanted it. You can have
it all to yourself for two years. We hope
you enjoy it.

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The effect of this information was electrical. Since we had entered the chamber our spirits had been a trifle dashed. We had had no clue to the exact location of the treasure. The place had looked utterly bare. There had been absolutely nothing to suggest a cache on those sheer clay-coated walls or upon the smooth sloping floor. Now, however, though all things outwardly remained the same, we knew for certain that somewhere in this dim rock-walled dungeon our treasure lay hidden; and we could scarcely contain ourselves for joy.

"Gee!" exclaimed Ned, "she's here, fellows, she's here! All we got to do is to find her!"

Our first thought, of course, was of the niche. Although we had examined this pretty thoroughly before, nevertheless we again investigated the space behind the skeleton's legs; but to no avail. The whole recess was, as I have said, very shallow, allowing room for little else than its grim occupant. Certainy now our lantern-light fell on nothing but the naked rock.

"Well," said Ned, "there's treasure in here somewhere, that's sure." And he began once more to search the empty chamber, holding the lantern close to the ground; while Hal and I followed, peering eagerly over his shoulder. We scanned every foot of the floor, especially where it met the walls, and had got around nearly to the skeleton again when, on my suddenly straightening up, the knife in my pocket fell clattering to the ground. Ned, still stooping, cocked his head towards me.

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“Do that again, Bert,” said he, giving me an upward sidelong glance. There was an odd expression in his eyes, I thought.

“Do what?” I asked, picking up my knife.

“Drop your knife again in the same place and listen.”

I did so, but was puzzled to guess what he was driving at. The knife struck end on; there was nothing peculiar in the sound that I could detect, save its resonance; but down here in this underground canyon every noise we made was resonant.

“Don’t you hear! Don’t you hear!” cried Ned, suddenly fired with new excitement. “Drop it out there now and notice the difference.”

I understood then: he thought he had discovered a covered cavity in the rock floor. And indeed when I had let fall my knife again, once in the center of the chamber and once where Ned was standing, there was no longer any doubt of it. I myself easily distinguished the flat crack of the one contact from the hollow clink of the other.

Ned was on his knees in a trice.

“Scrape the mud away over there, Hal!” he cried in a low thrilling voice. “Bert, on that side! We’ve found her, fellows, we’ve found her!”

For several minutes we worked in silence, tearing madly at the thin coat of clay. Once I paused and looked up. We made an uncanny picture, surely. Kneeling there in the orange glow of the lantern, the grisly skeleton standing above us and glimmering

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with its ghostly light, we looked like three goblins in some witch-haunted den of elfland.

Then, just as I bent forward to resume my scrapings, there fell on our ears a sound that plucked us terror-stricken to our feet. Someone had stumbled down the bank of loose rock in the third passage!

Ned was the first to find speech.

“Bottom!” he whispered, his face aghast. “We’re trapped!”

Frantic as I was with fear, I could only marvel in those first few seconds how completely and how foolishly we had forgotten our enemies.

Then Hal, with rare presence of mind, extinguished the lantern.

“What can we do?” he breathed. “They’ll kill us sure if they find us!”

Ordinarily resourceful, my mind was now a hopeless blank. A great fear had seized upon all my faculties, and I just stood there quaking. Then, as in a sort of dream, I heard Ned’s voice at my ear.

“Down low! We’re caught, but we can still make a stand. I’m going to shoot the first one that turns the corner!”

I crouched on the floor. Ned knelt at my side and trained the rifle up the short passageway in front of us. Already at the other end a dusky brightness had relieved the intense gloom.

And then I heard Ned fumble in his pockets. Ensuited a low whistling sound, like a swift intake of breath.

“Good Lord!” he gasped. “Did I?”

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“Did you what?” I demanded, my nerves on tenter-hooks.

He made no answer, but very softly thrust back the breech-block of the rifle, closed it, and thrust it back again. Then he gave a kind of stifled groan.

“What’s wrong?” I whispered.

“The game’s up! I left the cartridges down on the ledge!”

Hal sprang to his feet.

“To the other opening then!” said he. “Quick! It’s our only chance!”

Indeed, there wasn’t a moment to lose. Even now, at the turn of the last wide passage, a yellow light gleamed along the wall; and I heard the sound of approaching feet.

Groping our way across the darkness, we stole into the second exit, which Ned had discovered, and flattened ourselves against the rock as near to the upper end as possible. For it was our plan, understood by each of us without the uttering of a syllable, to beat our retreat so soon as the enemy should enter the treasure chamber. But our danger of discovery was twofold: Either they might flash their lantern through this narrow gap where we stood (for they could not help but notice it), or, when we crossed the main passage, they might be looking back and so detect us.

Hear now how this desperate business fell out.

CHAPTER XXVIII

What Happened in Dead Man's Cave—*Continued*

“EASY!” whispered a voice, sounding so close that I started involuntarily. Easy now, Buck. They heard me pitch down that thar’ bank, I reckon. They’re layin’ low, but we got ‘em this time.”

Then, before the other could answer, Bottom uttered a great cry and recoiled up the passage.

“Sperrits! We’re runnin’ foul o’ sperrits, Buck! The cave’s ha’nted!”

“Stop that bellerin’, you elyphunt!” rapped out Webb in a low voice. “What if it *is* a sperrit, bellerin’ ain’t a-goin’ to he’p us none. Besides, I ain’t see a sperrit yet what’s done me harm; an’ that thar’ one looks more like bones than the real genuwine article. Hit don’t move, neither.”

“I tell you, Buck,” said Bottom, in tones still trembling with fear, “them talkin’ sounds what we heard was sperrits a-gibberin’.”

“I guess a sperrit kills rattlers then and leaves footprints, don’t it?” returned the other in high scorn. “You *have* got a head atop o’ yer shoulders, *you have.*”

“Wal then,” said Bottom, “them kids is done f’r, ‘s all I’ll say. Sperrits is got ‘em, sure as you an’

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me's standin' here. An' they'll git us too if we fools around any longer."

At these words a great hope leaped up in my breast, and I could have hugged those glimmering bones out of thankfulness. But when Webb spoke again my heart sank.

"Thar's one thing about that thar' sperrit now," he said, as though arguing with himself, "hit don't move. An' I calls that oncommon odd, I does. It ain't nat'ral. Sperrits don't set quiet while thar's others discussin' of 'em. They ain't to be badgered, true sperrits ain't. They ain't built that way. An' here you 'n' me's been a-talkin' 'bout that thar' sperrit right to its face. Dern my skin, I don't believe it *is* a sperrit," he wound up; "leastways I'm a-goin' to find out." And he started down the passage to the chamber.

But at his first step Bottom sprang to his side.

"Don't! Don't, Buck lad!" he pleaded. "Don't cross it! I ain't see a man yet what crossed a sperrit an' lived to tell of it. Hit'll blast you, Buck, worse'n lightnin', an' me too. Let it be, lad. For Gawd's sake, don't cross it!"

The abject terror of these words was pitiful, and for a space Webb hesitated. At length, whipping out an oath,

"Sperrits er no sperrits," he cried, "thar's gold down here—leastways you was mighty keen on sayin' so. An' now we're right atop of it like, I'm not a-goin' to turn tail an' leave it. All the sperrits hoppin' out o' hell ain't a-goin' to bluff me!" On

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that he ran down the passage, and the next moment the light from his lantern was shining on the wall at the lower end of our hiding-place. He was in the treasure chamber.

But we dared not stir. Bottom still stood in the passage, blocking our escape. We could hear him groaning and mumbling to himself.

Suddenly Webb laughed aloud.

“A skelyt’n!” he sang out. “Nothin’ but a stinkin’ old skelyt’n what’s all plastered up with foxfire!” He laughed again. “I reckon that’s one on you, Jerry, fer sure!”

“Wal, skelyt’ns ain’t to be sneezed at neither,” cautioned Bottom. “I shouldn’t wonder now but what’s its sperrit’s a-standin’ somewhere close about.” Nevertheless he advanced slowly towards the chamber.

I nudged Ned carefully. I thought our opportunity was at hand. But at this point Webb must have given the skeleton a jerk, probably to show his contempt. There was a great clattering of bones upon the rock floor, and Bottom with a hoarse shriek of despair fled back up the passage. I cast a swift fearful glance at the mouth of our retreat, and, as I did so, a round skull rolled into view and lay grinning up at us. My heart jumped to my throat; the ghastly thing looked as if it were trying to play the tell-tale.

“Whar’ you runnin’ to, you big galoot?” Webb called out. “D’you think a sperrit ’ud fall to pieces

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like that? Leastways, I knows when I'm hit on the head by a chunk o' bone."

Bottom was half way up the third corridor by this time. But on hearing these words he halted and timidly retraced his steps. Meantime we could see the light shifting about in the chamber, and presently Webb spoke again.

"No sight o' them kids ner the gold neither, what I k'n see. This hole's as bare as a box-car. Hey, by thunder!" he broke off, "here's some writin' scrawled on this wall."

"Writin'?" queried Bottom, who had plucked up enough courage to come as far as to the turn again.

"Yes, writin'!" cried the other. "An' if you was half the man you set up fer bein', Jerry Bottom, you could read it right off. I can't, but I never had yer chances in life, I never. This here writin' likely tells us whar' the gold's hid too."

Bottom had now ventured once more down into the chamber. We heard his steps sound through the lower end of our passage. Noiselessly then Ned slipped out through the narrow crevice and tiptoed across the dim-lighted but dangerous space beyond. I followed and, as I passed over to the protecting darkness, I dared to steal a glance down towards our enemies. Amidst a number of scattered bones they were standing before the back wall, the lantern held between them, examining the writing.

Hal came next, and the three of us paused a moment to make sure we had not been observed. But all we heard was a muttered curse from Bottom

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and the words: "I'd give my right arm now fer a scrap of eddication." Then, our hearts beating high with hope, we began our wary flight up the corridor. We had escaped the death trap!

At first we proceeded very slowly, fearing to make the slightest sound. But, as we left our enemies farther behind, we quickened our pace until, breaking into a run, we fairly sped along. Once I glanced back over my shoulder; far down at the turn of the passage glimmered a faint light—the reflection from their lantern. But in front of us was naught but darkness, black and thick like a tangible substance.

My heart was singing now. We had escaped! We were free! Soon we should be standing again in the glad light of day and breathing the pure air. Once more we should see the bright river and the green hills and feel the warm kiss of the sunshine. These gloomy corridors and the ghostly skeleton and the cruel murderers behind there would no longer be realities but only the flitting shadows of some evil dream.

Drawn on by these thoughts, I mended my pace and spurted suddenly ahead. The next moment I had struck Ned's foot, sending him sprawling to the ground. The rifle in his hand rang loudly on the stone passage, the sound of it echoing along between the high walls.

"Go on!" whispered Hal. "I've got the gun."

Ned was on his feet in a trice and sprinting again through the darkness. But he had not taken a dozen

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steps, I at his heels, when he stumbled against the bank of rubble, and amid a crash of sliding stones we both rolled to the floor. Upon the instant a light flashed down at the end of the corridor, and with a roar of fury Bottom came leaping in pursuit.

Throwing caution to the winds, we scrambled noisily up the brashy incline and fled along the passage.

“Look out for the turn!” Hal called from behind, and just in the nick too, for as Ned halted and put out his hand he touched the wall of the second corridor. The delay cost us several seconds, and this, added to the time lost in mounting the loose rock, allowed our pursuers to lessen their handicap by half. As I turned the corner, with the tail of my eye I saw Bottom clear the rubble bank at a bound, his pistol in one hand and the lantern swinging in the other; and behind him gleamed the savage face of Webb.

In this second corridor they must have overtaken us surely had not fortune (or better, Providence) interposed a favoring hand. Bottom, who was not fifteen yards behind us now, suddenly slipped on the smooth floor and with a roar of baffled rage fell heavily to the ground, his companion bowling over on top of him. They were up in an instant, and, although their lantern had been extinguished by the shock, they could hear our footsteps and were pressing close behind us. For all that, we had gained a little by the lucky accident.

Just as we reached the high cleft leading into the

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last short passage a detonation like dynamite split the air, and a bullet struck fire from the rock wall not six inches above our heads.

“Quick!” I cried. “That’s their last cartridge!”

But, even as I uttered the words, my heart sank within me. What though it were their last cartridge, they must surely capture us at the mouth of the cave. We could never hope to scale that height in the few brief seconds that would be left us.

And then, with these despairing thoughts at my heart, I caught my first glimpse of the longed-for day. Over Ned’s shoulder glimmered a shaft of gray uncertain light, and I knew that up beyond that narrow throat of rock bright sunshine and safety lay upon the hillside.

Behind us Bottom was already struggling through the opening.

“We got ‘em, Buck!” he roared, and bursting into the passage, came bounding up after us like a wild beast.

Ned leaped for the first ledge, lost his hold, and toppled back with a cry of dismay. In that same instant Hal’s voice rang out high and clear:

“Stop where you are! Hands up!”

I swung round, too astonished for words. Hal stood with his back to us, the rifle held at aim in front of him. Beyond, in the dusky light of the passage, I discerned our pursuers, their arms aloft, fury, astonishment, and fear stamped upon their faces.

“Budge one inch, either of you,” cried Hal again,

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"and by the Lord Harry I'll put a bullet through your heart! Get out of this, you fellows," he added in his ordinary tones.

But neither Ned nor I stirred. We didn't see how Hal was to make his escape, and by a common though unspoken determination we remained where we were.

"But how are you going to get out, Hal?" asked Ned.

"You leave that to me," he returned, his eye still fixed along the rifle sights. "I'll get out. Hurry up now. Shin up that rock, or I'll pull this trigger before I know it; and I don't want to do any unnecessary killing."

"Looky here, sonny," began Bottom, oily and suave once more. (He was a coward at heart, I think.)

"Shut your mouth," snapped Hal, "or you'll eat bullets, you will. Now then, clear out, you fellows."

Well, what else could we do? There was nothing for it but to "clear out," as he had ordered. Ned clambered up first and I followed, though it went sore against my heart to leave the plucky lad alone with those two desperadoes. True, they could have no suspicion that the rifle was not loaded; yet I feared some trickery on their part, as the passage below was very dim (albeit our eyes had grown accustomed to the darkness) and especially as we obstructed the daylight in our ascent.

I gained the top, however, without having caught the least untoward sound (and oh, how delicious

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was the free air and the sunlight and the green trees!), though for the life of me I couldn't see how Hal was going to manage his own escape.

All ears, Ned and I lay at the lip of the hole. And after a little we heard Hal's voice; it sounded thin and piping but oh, so brave and unfaltering!

"Now then, turn about and march to the end of the passage. . . . Good. Hands up there! I can see plain enough to shoot. Now go through that opening. Step lively!"

There fell an interval of silence, and then, suddenly, we heard a brushing and scraping in the cave below and knew that Hal was beginning his ascent. The next moment his head appeared, and my heart gave a great throb of joy. Another step brought him a foot higher, and he looked up at us, smiling.

"Take the gun," he whispered and held up the barrel.

Then, as I reached down for it, I saw a sudden look of terror flash into his eyes, and a voice below roared out:

"I'll eat bullets, will I, you little devil! Yer own mother won't know you when I stops workin' on you! Come down here, you varmint!"

CHAPTER XXIX

On the Brow of the Cliff

NED and I looked at each other in despair. Hal had saved our lives at the risk of his own, and now he was to pay the forfeit of his heroic act.

We listened intently then, expecting every moment to hear his agonizing cries as those two brutes mangled his poor little body. But we heard nothing. Not a sound issued from that black forbidding hole.

"They're taking him below to torment him," said Ned, a great sob choking his voice. "What can we do?"

Idle question! There was absolutely nothing we could do. We could not stir a finger to help him. Our rifle was gone, but under the circumstances it could have availed us little.

"Ned, old man," said I, "we can't help it. Hal's a goner, I guess."

At these words he sprang to his feet with flashing eyes. I have never seen him more angry in my life. In his fury he caught up a large rock as though it were a pebble.

"If they touch a hair of his head," he cried, "they'll never get out of there alive! I'll kill 'em like rats in a trap!"

But he had scarce done speaking when, without

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my saying a word, his mood changed entirely. He sank down on the hillside, buried his face in his arms, and sobbed like a child. It was distressing to see him. But there was nothing I could do, nothing I could say. I could only sit there, my own eyes swimming with tears and my own heart wrung with pain at the fate of my gallant little friend.

How long we so remained I do not know, perhaps five minutes, perhaps ten; I only know that Ned quite suddenly sat up and almost shouted the two words: "Paul Plover!"

On him the name acted like a charm: despair vanished from his face, a bright hope sparkled in his eyes, and he leaped to his feet, brisk and ready, like one who has a welcome business to dispatch. But as for me, I thought it little indeed that Paul Plover could accomplish, and said so plainly.

"Paul Plover can't do anything," said I. "I don't know how he can help us."

"He'll know, though!" cried Ned, and put off like a deer along the summit of the hill.

Well, there was I, alone. I could not but deem Ned's errand futile. I made sure he had nothing more definite in mind than to fetch Mr. Plover to the scene; and once Mr. Plover were here, I reflected bitterly, he could only, like us, bite his thumbs on the surface above while Hal was being done to death in the dark cave below.

By degrees, as I sat there, my excitement and anguish subsided. It was well along in the afternoon now, and the air was warm and heavy and hushed.

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Not a leaf stirred. Not a bird note pricked the stillness. The sunshine slept on the grass about me, and below on the hillside long golden prisms, in which insects swam like tiny jewels, slanted through the green foliage. A few paces down to my left a pair of canary-colored butterflies were fluttering over a spray of wild roses; they seemed as if in two minds whether to alight. At last, just as they had got settled and were slowly opening and closing their pretty wings, a big black bumblebee, like a bullying intruder, came tumbling into the pink and yellow cluster and sent them off in panic flight.

I started up. Was it possible that I had allowed myself to be lulled into the slightest forgetfulness of our situation! Beneath this sunny hillside, so peaceful and so fair, beneath the gay flowers and the restful trees and the green grass a dark deed was in act; and the victim was my friend who had saved me! But while my heart bled at the thought my mind could scarce receive it; it was too incredible, too monstrous, too terribly incongruous with the smiling June day around me.

But the next moment I became convinced of the grim reality. Out of the dark pit at my feet issued Bottom's rolling tones:

“Up you goes, Buck! An’ keep that lone lamp o’ yourn lookin’ sharp.”

Quick as thought I darted down on the brow of the cliff where the bushes were thickest, dropped to the ground, and lay peering through the leaves at the mouth of the cave.

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Webb was the first to appear, or rather our rifle, whose shiny barrel stuck up over the circular embankment. A few seconds later it was followed by Webb's ill-featured visage. He cast his one eye cautiously around; but seeing nothing, he drew himself up, turned and said something to Bottom. His next act was rather odd, I thought: He reached down to grasp Bottom's hand as though he would assist that burly ruffian to ascend. But when he straightened up again I could have shouted for joy. Hal was standing on the hillside!

My first wild impulse was to run and greet him, for in those few moments of relief and intense gladness I could only suppose that our enemies had relented. But a narrower look at Hal convinced me of my folly. Webb had him gripped by the arm and, even as I looked, gave him a vicious wrench. Across the extreme paleness of his face lay two lines of clotted blood, like black threads. His cap was gone, and his clothes were torn and all smeared with bright yellowish clay. What dreadful pain they had inflicted on him down there I could not guess; nor why they had spared his life and brought him once more to the light of day. But I made sure they would show no mercy and that in the end, whatever their present purposes might be, they meant to kill him.

On the other hand, Hal was still alive, and so long as he was alive there was a bare chance of his escaping out of their hands. At all events, he was not lying murdered far down in that dismal cave. He

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was only thirty yards away, standing in the bright sunshine.

And then, suddenly, as I lay there, now hoping now despairing, I saw Bottom (who, by this time, had reached the surface and taken possession of Hal) point straight down to my hiding-place. My heart gave a great thump in my breast, but, ere I could slip away, they had started directly towards me. I thought at first that they had spied me, but as they approached I could tell by their manner that they were totally unaware of my presence. Yet I dared not stir an inch. Lying low in the dense covert, I heard them pass not five yards to my right and descend to the level space before the edge of the cliff.

I had caught not a word thus far—scarce a word indeed had they spoken—and you may be sure I kept my ears pricked for any remarks that might betray their plans. Why had they brought Hal out of the cave? It was utterly impossible that they were going to spare his life. Had they discovered the treasure? It hardly looked that way. But if not, what were they doing up here, and with Hal? These and a dozen other questions flashed unanswered through my mind. Burning with curiosity, I risked a shift in my position so as to command a view of them and the better to hear their every word. Scarcely had I made the change when Bottom seated himself on the grass and drew Hal gently down to his side. Then he took out his pipe, slowly filled it, and, having struck a match, puffed quietly two or

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three times before he spoke. Turning at length to Webb, who stood by with a sneer of disapproval on his lips,

“Buck,” said he easily, “I reckon you might set that popgun agin the tree yonder an’ come have a seat, friendly like.”

Grumbling, Webb complied with the suggestion.

Bottom smoked a little longer. Then, taking the pipe from his mouth, he addressed himself to Hal.

“Looky here, sonny,” said he, “I reckon you and us don’t agree.”

“We don’t,” snapped Hal between his teeth. The old villain went on, not a whit ruffled.

“We don’t, says you. And I ain’t a-blamin’ of you neither, says I. But looky now, we’re a-goin’ to agree, I says; an’ be frien’s, what’s more. B’fore, you was pullin’ gee, an’ me ‘n’ Buck here, we was pullin’ haw; which was on’y nat’ral under circumstances, says you. An’ as to that thar’ little roughin’ we gived you down yonder in the cave, you’ll bear in mind, I hope, that we was a bit het up like, an’ we begs yer pardon, Buck an’ me does, right humbly.”

To this Hal answered nothing, but Webb jumped up and swore.

“Not on yer tintype, Jerry Bottom!” he cried. “I don’t beg no pardons, ner you neither. All I begs is the heart o’ that tadpole, an’ I means to have it too!”

Bottom turned fiercely on his companion.

“You keep a civil tongue in yer head, Buck Webb,

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er by thunder, I'll pitch you over that cliff! If you can't behave like a gen'l'm'n should, you k'n leastways shut up!"

At these words with very poor grace Webb knuckled under; it was plain to see which was the better man above ground.

"Don't you mind Buck, sonny," Bottom continued, assuming his conciliatory air. "He's quick to fire up, is Buck, but hit don't last. He'll be as gentle as a dove er a Sunday-school miss b'fore long. Don't mind him. You just cock yer ears to what *I* got to say to you."

He paused then and took a few pulls on his pipe, calmly.

"Now then, sonny, bygones bein' bygones, here's the way we stand. You knows thar's gold in that thar' hole, an' we knows it too. You beats us thar' an' sees d'rections writ on the wall, which same you, bein' a bright penny, reads off like print. We alongs an' breaks in on yer readin', an' you resigns. But we ain't none the better; them d'rections stares us right in the face, but they may as well be writ in a Chinyman's languidge—we can't read. 'Ign'rant clodhoppers,' says you, an' right you was. But looky, sonny, here's my p'int: Let's whack up on this here gold. You read that writin', an' we divvys the treasure, you an' me an' Buck. This is what I was a-drivin' at below, but you was so flustered up, like, an' scairt—an' no wonder, says you—that I thought we'd better come up here in the sunshine an' talk things over like true pardners. Now what answer

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you goin' to make frien' Jerry?" And with that the lying blackguard laid his great dirty hand in a comradely gesture on Hal's shoulder; he meant to encourage him, I suppose. But Hal kept silent, his eyes fixed on the ground before him.

"Come, come, sonny!" cried Bottom in a fine show of friendliness. "We ain't a-goin' to hurt you none, we ain't. Don't you be afeared. Why, looky now, what good 'ud come of harmin' a bright penny like you? Besides, lad, you didn't think ole Jerry Bottom could find it in his heart to touch a hair of yer pretty head, did you now? Him what all the kiddies back home calls 'Daddy Jerry!'" He put his pipe back in his mouth and looked expectantly at Hal.

Although I hoped with all my soul that Hal would reveal the whereabouts of the treasure and so save his life, yet I knew he was not taken in by the monster's crude duplicity. A child could detect it. It was open, palpable.

"I suppose you want an answer," said Hal at length, raising his head. His voice was firm and clear, and, though I was unable to see his face, I knew that his eyes were fearless. "Well then, I have only one word to say to you, Jerry Bottom. You may wag your lying tongue from now till the crack of doom, but you'll never get me to read that writing. That's my answer; make the most of it!"

Bottom continued smoking for a while, motionless. Then, removing his pipe, he knocked the ashes out against the heel of his boot.

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“Buck,” said he in an ominously quiet tone, “I reckon you was right from the first. Kill the stubborn cub, says you; an’ right you was.” Thereupon he sprang to his feet and with one hand swept Hal from the ground. In three strides he was at the brink of the precipice and, holding the poor little fellow suspended over the abyss,

“How do you like the looks o’ that?” he cried. “Do that change your mind any? Come, I’ll give you one more chance. If you speaks up like a little man, well an’ good; gold an’ to burn fer the three of us. If you don’t,”—here his voice rose to a perfect fury—“then, by—, I’ll splatter you on them rocks below like a rotten apple!”

“Oh, drop him an’ be done!” flung out Webb, with a curse.

There followed then a moment of awful silence. Hal still hung over the cliff, clutched in Bottom’s hands. His eyes were closed, and there was a calm expression on his countenance.

“Come,” urged Bottom, “what says you? I’ll give you three to speak up. . . . One—two—”

“Wait!” cried Hal, opening his eyes; and at the word I think I almost fainted with relief. “I *have* got something to say. Put me down.”

In an instant the old knave had changed front again.

“Now you’re talkin’ like the sweet lad I knowed you was. I see all along you was on’y playin’ with us, like. I says to myself from the first, ‘Jerry Bottom,’ says I, ‘this here lad is O. K., he is. Just

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you treat him right, an' he'll be hand 'n' glove with you in no time,' says I. Now, sonny," he added, placing his two big paws affectionately on Hal's shoulders, "don't I deserve to hear that thar' writin' read?"

Hal looked up at him with unflinching eyes.

"What you deserve, Jerry Bottom," said he, "is a halter! And you'll get it too, sooner than you think. Listen now: that writing in the cave doesn't say one word as to where the treasure is. You two have been following a false scent, like a couple of curs!"

Bottom fell back a pace in downright surprise.

"But I know where the treasure is," Hal went on, his voice ringing more defiantly at every word; "I know where it's hidden, and you shan't have a single shining dollar of it!" Bottom stood with mouth agape, too dumbfounded to move. "What's more," cried Hal, "if you want to know who cut in on your plans, it was I! I found the cipher on the man you murdered, and made it out too! I held you at bay down in that cave with an empty rifle—an empty rifle, you cowardly bully! Now kill me if you want; I'm ready to die; but God have mercy on your soul when you're swinging on the gallows!"

With a roar of rage Bottom sprang upon him. Catching him up and shaking him as a mastiff would

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shake a fice, he advanced to the very brink of the cliff.

"Look below, you devil's imp," he cried, "an' pick out a soft place to hit! I deserves a halter, does I? Wal, I'd a sight ruther drop a rope's length than a cliff's length; an' air is softer to land on than rock, I reckon!"

Then, stepping back, he swung Hal aloft to dash him to his death.

I closed my eyes upon the sight; it was too terrible to witness. But as I buried my head in the grass there sounded quite close to me the swish of swiftly parted brushes; and when I looked up I saw Paul Plover snatch Hal from Bottom's grasp and toss him back in safety upon the ground. Like a flash Bottom had turned, and the two giants were locked in each other's arms.

Almost at the same instant Webb sprang forward to aid his companion; but, as he did so, a voice on my right cried out:

"Stop, Buck Webb, or I'll shoot!"

Both Webb and I, equally surprised, wheeled round; but he in dismay, I with a shout of joy. There was Ned standing behind the bushes, not five yards off, with Paul Plover's long pea-rifle leveled at Webb's heart.

"Hands up!" Ned commanded. "Quick! Now back away. There, that will do."

I turned then and watched the struggle on the edge of the precipice. Neither Bottom nor our friend had moved an inch since they first came to grips. They

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were as motionless as the very ground on which they stood. Save for their labored breathing you might have thought they were two statues. Yet, underneath this apparent repose, was the conflict of two mighty forces, each bent on the destruction of the other.

How tremendous was the energy exerted I could only surmise from a few silent signs of the two combatants. Bottom's purple face, thrust forward over Mr. Plover's arched back, stared at me with bursting eyeballs. The heels of both antagonists were ground into the turf; their arms, grappled like steel about each other's bodies, showed even through their shirt sleeves the swollen muscles.

It might have been two minutes perhaps that they remained in this position. All at once Mr. Plover's back arched more sharply, and putting forth a supreme effort, he took one step forward and forced Bottom to the very utmost verge of the cliff. Then, in a twinkling, he let go his body-hold, plucked his adversary up by the feet and heaved him, somersault fashion, back over his head. The sudden violence of the motion broke Bottom's grip, and he fell heavily to the ground.

But almost immediately, before Mr. Plover could make use of this advantage, Bottom was on his feet again. Ensued then a series of feints and dodges, both men keenly watching for a favorable opening. But I noticed that Mr. Plover was kept with his back to the river, his opponent balking his every attempt to improve his position; and I began to fear that the

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fight would go against our champion. My heart was beating thickly now; I tried to lick my lips, but my tongue was as dry as cotton. And then, all in a shake, a thing happened that brought me up on my toes, with no breath in my body.

Bottom was crouching low, his immense fists, like mallets, held up before him. Quite suddenly he lunged forward and swung savagely at the other's head. Mr. Plover ducked, and, had he not countered, I verily believe the force of the drive would have carried Bottom over the cliff. As it happened, our friend delivered a blow in Bottom's face that would have felled an ox. But that great hulk only blinked his eyes and recoiled a yard, the blood spurting from his ears. For a bare second he was dazed; but, brief as the interval was, it allowed Mr. Plover to spring back from the brink of the precipice and face his enemy on an equal footing.

Bottom's visage was now a very picture of passion. Hate, fury, and every feeling of deadly malice flamed forth from his countenance; the long scar across his cheek stood out like a welt against the dark, burning skin; and the fingers of his hands were twitching horribly in his mad desire to kill. But Mr. Plover was still cool; his eyes, narrowed to two glistening slits, were marking each slightest move of his antagonist.

In two twos then, as I was yet wondering how long the agony of it would last, the battle ended. With something like a muffled roar Bottom leaped wildly forward. Mr. Plover sprang aside and

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turned to face a second charge. But there was no second charge. Bottom had slipped and fallen, his shoulder glancing a bump on the grass-covered surface of the cliff. Before he could check himself he had rolled twice over straight towards the precipice. In a desperate effort to stay his slide he grasped the root of a scrub-cedar; the root held, but the momentum of the huge body was too great: the legs swung round and, kicking furiously for a purchase, skidded over the brink of the rock.

The change that came over that evil face! It was only a moment that he hung there, for already the root was ripping out of the crumbly soil; but in that moment rage had given place to terror, wild terror that filled all his wicked soul and looked up at us out of despairing eyes.

And then, suddenly, the root twisted and broke; and the black-hearted villain dropped to his doom.

CHAPTER XXX

Treasure-Trove

FOR a space none of us spoke or stirred. Mr. Plover still stood in an attitude of defense; Ned still covered Webb with the rifle; Hal was kneeling motionless by the side of a hazel bush, his right hand clutching one of the stems; and I continued to gaze at the spot where Bottom's face had so tragically vanished. This was our attitude, just as if we were posing in a tableau. Then a crow cawed back on the hill, and the tension snapped.

With one accord all of us, Ned and his prisoner excepting, rushed to the edge of the cliff and looked below. Save for a dark stain on the rim of the ledge and a fast widening ripple on the surface of the water we could see nothing of Bottom. The river had swallowed his great body, so full of iniquities, and we never laid eyes on it thereafter: a fitting end, I cannot help thinking, for a man who drowned his own companion.

Mr. Plover turned, wiping his beaded forehead on his sleeve.

"Boys," said he very gravely, "I 'low Gawd 'lmighty had somethin' to do with that fight, I do." Then, with a smile, "how you feelin', Hallie boy?" he asked, taking Hal by the arm. "Did they hurt you much?"

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Whatever they had done to him, Hal looked pretty well now, and said so.

"That pea-rifle o' mine's gettin' kind o' heavy, I reckon, ain't she, Ned?" he went on, in high feather. "You jest hold her a little longer while I trusses up that 'ere gen'l'm'n with this bit o' fishin' line. Hit don't look stout, but when I finishes with him I guar'ntee he don't break it."

Webb said nothing to this; only glowered at us savagely with his single eye.

Thereupon, with marvelous dexterity, Mr. Plover bound him hand and foot. He offered some little resistance, but when Ned pressed the muzzle of the pea-rifle against his chest, he soon subsided and lay back as quiet as a lamb.

"Now," said Mr. Plover, standing up, "I reckon some o' you boys'll have to foot it to Fairdale to fetch the constable."

"No," said Ned, "we want to get the treasure first."

"Treasure!" cried Mr. Plover. "What treasure?"

"Didn't Ned tell you about that, Mr. Plover?" I asked, surprised. "The treasure's the cause of it all!"

And then, as we sat there on the brow of the cliff with Webb lying at our feet—an unwilling auditor enough, I daresay—Ned related the story of our treasure hunt.

At the end, Mr. Plover slapped his thigh and looked around on us in the greatest admiration.

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“Well now, you boys is cute!” he exclaimed. “But you’re the cutest, Hal! Think o’ readin’ that secret writin’ now! Why, readin’ ordinary writin’ is hard enough without throwin’ in any extrys. An’ the cave!” he added, jumping up excitedly, just like any boy. “You got to show me where she is, an’ we’ll all go down an’ fetch up your treasure!”

“But what about him, Mr. Plover?” said I, jerking my head at Webb. I was still a little afraid of that one-eyed miscreant.

Mr. Plover laughed.

“Don’t you fret, Bert,” said he. “That pesky critter won’t bother us none. I ‘low he’ll rest purty quiet. Come, take your gun.”

Well, for safety’s sake we brought our two guns with us (though, of course, the Winchester was harmless enough without cartridges), leaving Webb lying bound on the brow of the cliff.

Mr. Plover could hardly get over his surprise when we reached the mouth of the cave.

“Well now, I declare! Ef that don’t beat all ever I heard on! Here I been over this same hill off ‘n’ on any time these twelve year, an’ I thought I knowed her like a book. But here was this cave here, a-layin’ right under my nose, like, an’ I don’t never see her! Well, boys, let’s drop on down.”

It did not take us long to get to the treasure chamber now. We knew the way, and besides we used our enemies’ lantern which we found on the hillside. It was not long either before we had laid bare the slab of rock that covered the opening in

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the floor. It was a heavy slab, and I doubt very much whether we had been able to lift it without Mr. Plover's aid. But when he had secured a firm grip on one side and strained back with those great arms of his, the huge stone swung up as easily as the top of a bread-box.

We dropped on our knees, we three, at the edge of the cavity while Mr. Plover stood over us, holding the lantern. The yellow light fell into a long shallow crevice, revealing a number of curious objects that looked like a cluster of large toadstools or puff-balls. They were round and somewhat dun-colored, with blotches of green mold showing here and there.

"What the deuce are they?" I began.

"Moneybags!" cried Ned all of a sudden. "Money-bags, that's what they are!" And he reached down to take one out.

But just as he was pulling it forth there was a shower of thuds and chinks in the hole below, and he held up in his hand an empty leatheren sack.

"She broke!" cried Hal. "Hold the light closer, Mr. Plover."

We looked again into the crevice. There, scattered all over the toadstools, lay glinting gold coins.

"Gold!" cried Mr. Plover. "By ericky, gold sure enough!"

Well, you should have seen the way we tumbled about the floor of that old dungeon! We were simply wild with joy. The skeleton held no terrors for us now. We kicked its bones aside just to show how

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little we feared it. (And I suppose we were a trifle irreverent, too, in doing so.)

Mr. Plover watched us with a broad grin on his face, and when we were quieted down once more and were standing about the treasure,

“Well, boys,” said he, “I reckon I’m about as daft as you is. Jest to think now, how many times I’ve stood up yonder with my two legs planted over this here pile o’ money, an’ thinkin’ about as little on it as the woodpecker in the next tree. By gum, hit do beat all ever I heard on, hit sure do!”

We began lifting out the sacks then, but as they all burst, one after the other, Ned tore off his shirt and bade me do the same.

“We’ll carry it up in our shirts,” said he. “They’re flannel; they’ll hold.”

Well, when we had filled them, we certainly did have two heavy loads.

“Gee!” said I, trying the heft of one, “we’ve sure got some gold here! I wonder how much there is.”

“Looky here,” cried Mr. Plover, who was holding one of the bursted bags, “here’s somethin’ printed on a piece o’ tin.”

I examined it; it was an aluminum tag with the letter M stamped into it.

“That’s an M,” said I. “I wonder what it means.”

“Here’s five C’s on this one,” said Ned. “Another M on this one. . . . Why, they’ve all got letters on ‘em! I wonder what they stand for.”

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"I got it!" cried Hal suddenly. "They're Latin letters, standing for numbers! We had all that last year in school. M means a thousand; C means one hundred, so five C's would mean five hundred!"

Mr. Plover laid his hand on Hal's shoulder.

"Well now, listen at that!" said he in admiration. "Hal, you're the smartest boy ever I laid eyes on!"

Even in the dim lantern-light I could see Hal's flush of pleasure. I believe he thought more highly of this simple compliment of Mr. Plover's than of all the distinctions he afterwards won at college.

"Well," said Ned, "at that rate we've got twenty thousand dollars of gold. There are fifteen sacks marked M and ten marked with five C's."

"Twen-ty thous-and dollars of gold!" I echoed. "Great Caesar's ghost, that's a pile!"

"Right smart sum, I reckon," said Mr. Plover. "You boys is close to bein' millionaires, you is. Well, let's fetch her up to daylight."

I was the first out of the cave, and just as I raised my head above the embankment I thought I saw a sudden movement down among the shadows of the hillside, as of someone darting to cover. It might have been a trick of my imagination, for my mind was running on Webb just then; nevertheless, I kept my eyes glued on the suspicious spot till the rest had ascended.

"Mr. Plover," I said then, without turning my head, "I think Webb's escaped."

Mr. Plover only chuckled.

"Don't you worry, Bert," said he. "He ain't

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escaped—without he's a heap smarter'n I am, which I ain't ready to allow jest yet, thick as I am. Come on; we'll find him a-layin' jest where he was, 'less he's done gone 'n' tuk a notion to roll off the bluff."

"Maybe you're right," said I; "but you just follow me a piece down the hill. If it isn't Webb I saw two minutes ago it's his ghost."

We had not taken a dozen steps when, sure enough, our captive started up from behind a stump and, amid a din of rolling stones and cracking brush, went plunging down the hillside.

In a trice Mr. Plover had whipped his rifle to his shoulder; but before he could pull the trigger Hal had knocked the barrel aside.

"Don't shoot!" he cried.

Amazed, Mr. Plover only stared down at him blankly. Then, suddenly, his face lighted with understanding.

"C'rect!" he exclaimed. "Take him alive!" And with that he went racing after the fugitive.

We followed pell-mell. But, while we were yet some distance from the bottom, we heard a loud splash and knew that Webb had taken to the river. As we came out in view of the water there was Mr. Plover standing on a rock, his gun held in readiness and his eyes keenly searching the surface of the stream.

"He ain't no bullfrog," he said without looking around; "he'll come up purty quick."

Hal caught him by the arm.

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"Don't shoot him, Mr. Plover," he pleaded.
"Please don't shoot him!"

Mr. Plover looked down with a puzzled expression.

"But I cain't take him alive now, Hal," said he, "without I go in the water clothes 'n' all, an' the dirty rat hain't worth that."

"Don't take him at all," said Hal. "Let him go, Mr. Plover, please do."

"There he is now!" I cried, as a head appeared on the surface half way across the river.

But Mr. Plover didn't even turn his eyes. He was gazing in astonishment at Hal.

"Honest, Hal, you don't want me to shoot him?" he asked in a low wondering tone; "him what misused you so, an' would 'a' killed you too?"

"No," Hal replied, looking out on the river. "Let him go."

Mr. Plover dropped his rifle, and the four of us stood there in silence, watching the swimmer. He had dived a second time, but when he emerged again, seeing that no shot was fired, he swam on in to shallow water and waded boldly to the shore.

Across the river at this point there was a small sand-bar, and beyond it a narrow stretch of backwater which lay at the foot of a steep bank bordering the stream for several hundred yards.

Through this backwater Webb went splashing, but when he came to the bank he stopped short, turning his head to either side. His path of escape was apparently blocked. Then, looking round for

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the first time, he saw us standing on the opposite shore; whereupon he made a sudden desperate effort to scale the height in front of him, but only sliddered back into the water.

“Take your time,” called Mr. Plover. “We ain’t a-goin’ to shoot.”

Upon that the vile wretch faced about and, shaking his fist, spouted out the foulest stream of language God ever permitted man to utter.

When he had done he ran down the backwater a little way to where a couple of branches overhung the bank. Leaping up, he caught one of these and began to climb hand over hand.

Mr. Plover suddenly raised his rifle.

“No, Hal,” said he, smiling, “I ain’t a-goin’ to shoot him. But I lay I’ll learn that polecat a lesson.”

I glanced across again at Webb. He had now ascended half way, working furiously, his feet against the steep earth and his hands grasping the bough one over the other.

Crack! went Mr. Plover’s gun, and almost at the same instant Webb tumbled back into the water, the lower part of the bough still in his hands. The rifle-ball had severed it clean!

Webb didn’t tarry now to pour out his imprecations; but, seizing the remaining branch, seemed to fly up the bank, fear doubtless lending wings. Once on the top he cast one look behind him and then disappeared in the thick foliage.

“Well,” said Plover, still chuckling, “I don’t

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reckon we'll see any more o' that toad, I don't." And with that we turned and retraced our steps up the hillside.

We brought our treasure then down to the open level space on the cliff and spread it out for a closer view. I don't think I ever saw so much gold before or since: a heaping pile of dull yellow pieces, eagles and double-eagles by the handful, just as Ned had predicted.

"Lordy now!" said Mr. Plover, leaning on his peacirle and smiling down at us, "I reckon you boys 'll buy all the pop-corn an' gimeracks what's made. Won't you have a time though!"

Hal suddenly sprang to his feet and walked towards the edge of the cliff. He stood there for a moment, facing the river; then, turning quickly,

"Look here, you fellows," said he, "there are twenty thousand dollars in that pile,—more than we can spend in a lifetime. Give Mr. Plover half, I say!"

"Right!" cried Ned, jumping up; "if it hadn't been for Mr. Plover we wouldn't have it at all."

"Yes, and if it hadn't been for Mr. Plover," said I, "we wouldn't have Hal either."

"And just think, Mr. Plover," said Hal eagerly, clasping his arm and looking up at him, "you can try farming again, and buy nice dresses for Mrs. Plover, and get that piano for her too, you know!"

Mr. Plover turned his head and looked off across the river; but I saw a tear glisten in the corner of his eye. After a little, with gaze still averted,

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"Hal," said he, laying his big brown hand on Hal's shoulder, "I reckon I don't know how to thank you boys. I ain't no hand at speeches an' sech. But the ole girl,—she'll know."

Mr. Plover then invited us back to his house for the night, saying he would accompany us over to Fairdale on the morrow. We were glad enough to accept of his hospitality again, as you may suppose; accordingly, when he had slung the two bundles of gold over his shoulder, he set out for home, we three following in his wake.

Although, in his simple, kindly manner, he was very lively and talkative throughout the whole way, Ned, Hal, and I scarce spoke a word. We were thinking back on all the dangers we had lived through, and were silently thanking God for His dear care and protection. And I was thanking our Blessed Mother, too; for I made sure she had watched over us all along and that particularly during those racking minutes in Dead Man's Cave her loving arms had been about us.

THE END



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